

Research Article

Siyang Zhou* and Heath Rose

“Am I really abroad?” The informal language contact and social networks of Chinese foundation students in the UK

<https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2022-0042>

Received February 21, 2022; accepted January 17, 2023; published online February 9, 2023

Abstract: British higher education institutions attract a large number of international students, especially Chinese students, to pursue degrees in the UK every year. This longitudinal mixed-methods study tracked the informal language contact and social networks of Chinese foundation program students in the UK for two terms. A Language Contact Questionnaire and a Study Abroad Social Network Survey were administered to 84 students and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 participants in the first term and the second term of study. Data revealed that the participants generally had a high percentage of L1 use, high academic L2 contact, and mainly L1 social networks during studying abroad, with little variation over the two terms. Their relationships with international friends were superficial and a vibrant international student community was not found. L2 topic multiplexity and online L2 contact frequency weakly predicted the total informal L2 contact at Term 1 and Term 2. This study underscores that degree-oriented SA participants may have different prioritization and leisure time routines compared with summer school participants or exchange students abroad. Thus, with an extra foundation year in the host country, the current sample seemed to prioritize academic preparation, rather than social integration.

Keywords: Chinese students; foundation year; language contact; social networks; study abroad

***Corresponding author: Siyang Zhou**, Center for Language Education Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong, E-mail: lcszhou@ust.hk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0852-0265>

Heath Rose, University of Oxford, Oxford, England, E-mail: heath.rose@education.ox.ac.uk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6434-6663>

1 Introduction

With the internationalization of higher education, study abroad (SA) has become a global phenomenon and a multitude of SA programs have emerged to meet the various needs of international students. Foundation programs, sometimes called “international foundation year”, are typically one-year preparation courses which help international students to meet the language/academic requirements of degree studies in British universities (Finlayson 2019). Between 2012–13 and 2017–18, the number of new foundation year students in the UK saw a sharp rise from 10,430 to 30,030 per year (Finlayson 2019). Foundation students invest a large amount of time and funds to reach the entry requirements of British higher education and they live in the host country for an extended period of time to complete a full degree (three years for bachelor degrees and one to two years for masters degrees). In contrast, exchange students, such as ERASMUS participants, engage in stays of limited duration, so they may “invest” only limited effort to integrate in the new environment (Murphy-Lejeune 2001). Much of what we assume about SA is based on students of the latter population, so it is necessary to investigate the L2 exposure of foundation students to discern whether this learner cohort is more committed to social integration and acculturation than other SA learner cohorts, with this longer length of stay and academic commitment in mind.

This mixed-methods study integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to track the changes of language contact and social networks of Chinese foundation students in the UK over two terms. Situated in the SA literature, this paper will first review existing empirical studies and key instruments related to language contact and social networks of SA learners. Then it will expatiate the methodology of this study and present the findings by research questions. The findings from this study will not only enrich our understanding of the L2 usage patterns of an under-researched SA population, but also shed light on the potential influences of contextual factors and participants features on L2 contact during SA. Finally, implications for supporting foundation students and recommendations for future research will be made.

2 Literature review

2.1 Language contact

In SA research, language contact can be operationalized as “the amount of time using L2 and how the time is used” (Dewey 2017, p. 49). Informal L2 contact has garnered attention in SA research because developing language skills is one of the commonly

expected benefits of an “immersion context” and L2 contact is also a key element of the “immersion” imaginary by SA participants (Doerr 2016; Kubota 2016). As Durbidge (2019) points out, since social contact by SA participants is sensitive to ongoing societal changes, assumptions about study abroad should be subject to continual re-examination in contemporary contexts.

Researchers have gone to great lengths to unravel the quantity, types, and quality of the language contact in SA but unfortunately little consensus has been reached (Briggs Baffoe-Djan and Zhou 2020). Regarding language contact patterns, a majority of empirical studies showed that studying abroad did not lead to sustained interaction in the L2, with L1 use being more prevalent among SA participants (Dewey 2017). Reviewing existing literature, students’ L2 contact opportunities were often eroded by close-knit social cliques with L1-speaking friends from the home institutions (García-Amaya 2021) and regular virtual contact with families and friends in the home country (Durbidge 2019; Mitchell 2015). Many students reported leaving the host country with a regret of not habitually speaking the L2 with local people (Ife 2000; Mitchell 2015). Only a handful of international students consciously kept distance from co-national friends and actively socialized in the host community, which strengthened their L2 contact (Isabelli-García 2006; Kinginger and Blattner 2009). The current study aims to reveal the L2 contact pattern of Chinese foundation students in the UK and unravel their potential systematic group-level differences from other SA participants.

Changes in the amount of L2 contact over time also vary among different samples and different SA programs. Some studies documented a clear rise in interactive social contact such as speaking and listening (Taguchi 2008; Taguchi et al. 2016). Some other studies did not identify sharp changes in the L2 use in specific scenarios over time (McManus et al. 2014) or even reported a sharp downward trend in L2 use, especially speaking and listening (García-Amaya 2017, 2021). It is possible that individual differences and contextual factors had exerted influences on changes in L2 contact. Combining quantitative and qualitative data, the current study could reveal the trajectory of L2 contact changes during the initial period of an extended SA experience. Changes in patterns of L2 use might reflect how students manage their life priorities and English learning in the foundation program.

Various questionnaires have been developed to measure the amount and types of language contact of SA participants, such as the Language Contact Profile (LCP) (Freed et al. 2004), the language log (Martinsen et al. 2010), Language Engagement Questionnaire (LEQ) (McManus et al. 2014), and Daily Linguistic Questionnaire (DLQ) (García-Amaya 2017), just to name a few. The LCP and the LEQ can gauge a holistic picture of the L2 use by asking respondents to recall average frequencies of engagement in different activities and the LEQ further taps into such patterns in L1 and L3, recognizing the multilingual reality of SA. In contrast, the language log and the DLQ garner daily “snap-shots” of the amount of L2 use in specific tasks during SA,

which offers greater specificity of data but requires a higher level of commitment from the respondents.

2.2 Social networks

According to Dewey et al. (2014, p. 40), a social network is “a structure comprised of individuals connected with others by one or more specific types of relationships”. The characteristic of learners’ social networks not only speaks to the quality of L2 use (e.g. the amount of meaningful spoken interaction) during SA, but also sheds light on the level of integration in the local community (Dewey et al. 2013), so collecting both language contact and social networking data can form a comprehensive picture of the L2 exposure of the sample.

A common theme in this line of research is that learners experience difficulty integrating with locals or L2 native speakers in the host country, regardless of living arrangements (Magnan and Back 2007; McManus et al 2014; Wilkinson 1998). For those not in homestays, the interaction with L2 native speakers is usually limited to academic activities in class, and rarely extends beyond campus (Dörnyei et al. 2004). Although SA students often use L2 in service encounters, their conversations are usually superficial and highly formulaic (Dörnyei et al. 2004; Trentman 2013). However, research is yet to probe whether socially active Chinese students, who have been otherwise characterized as particularly homogeneous, can take advantage of the foundation year for sociocultural adaptation.

The longitudinal changes of social networks during SA tend to show large individual variation (Isabelli-García 2006). Some students are observed to make many international friends and form close relationships with them from the beginning of their stay (Mitchell 2015), but relationships with locals usually require more intercultural facilitation, which takes time and is harder to build (Hendrickson 2018). Towards the end of the SA period, the size of a learner’s L2 social network might shrink as the students typically only maintain friendships with a few close friends (McManus et al. 2014). Only those students with high motivation and strong intercultural awareness are able to break out from the “bubbles” of international or L1-speaking students and continue to expand their L2-speaking networks (Dörnyei et al. 2004; Isabelli-García 2006). Given that the foundation programs do not admit local students, it is a unique context to explore whether the development of L2 social networks of foundation students is slower and more difficult as a result.

In SA literature, as more attention has been paid to the social networks of SA participants, a plethora of social network surveys emerged, such as the Study Abroad Social Interaction Questionnaire (SASIQ: Dewey et al. 2013), the Social Networks Questionnaire (SNQ: McManus et al. 2014), the Social Network Strength Scale (SNS: Kennedy Terry 2017), and the personal network questionnaire (Xie and Liu 2021),

which have different emphases. For instance, the SNQ collects information on the characteristics of the listed friends in different contexts, but does not probe into the relationship between those connections. The SASIQ and the personal network questionnaire collect characteristics of the connections as well as quality of the networks, while the SNSS has a unique strength in collecting the multiplexity of the activities and topics that the respondents participated in or talked about in the L2. The current study harnesses the merits of these instruments in measuring the social network of participants.

2.3 Social network predictors of language contact

Language contact is often regarded as a possible predictor of linguistic development in SA (Baker-Smemoe et al. 2014) but little research has been conducted on the predictors of language contact of SA participants. Research has shown that learners' initial oral skills (Segalowitz and Freed 2004) and extroversion and openness to new experiences (Dewaele 2012) may influence the amount and type of extracurricular L2 activities they engage in. In a study on 118 American students in six different countries, Dewey et al. (2014) found that the size of L2 social networks (the number of native speaker friends) weakly predicted the amount of informal L2 contact only when the program location was not included in the model. Thus, while the influence of social network on informal language contact exists, it may not be strong and can be overridden by other contextual factors. The current study will explore the relationship between language contact and social networks on the Chinese participants to further clarify these relationships.

2.4 Gaps in the literature and research questions

Variation is a key theme in SA literature, which suggests that conclusions drawn from certain SA programs should not be overgeneralized to other SA cohorts. Therefore, a few gaps in the research on language contact and social networks are addressed by the current study. Firstly, foundation program students are an under-researched SA learner cohort, as previous studies on students in short-term summer schools and exchange programs are often characterized by mild academic pressure and interest in cultural experience (Beerkens et al. 2016). In contrast, foundation students aim to receive a recognized university degree in a foreign country and improve their future job prospects (Zhou and Briggs Baffoe-Djan 2023). Foundation year students' limited English proficiency is mixed with the uncertainty and pressure in an academic SA program, influencing the types of language contact and the investment into L2 social networks of them. Secondly, the Chinese student population

is of particular research interest for two reasons. China is the top country of origin of international students in the UK and makes up one third of the total number of international students there (Study International 2018), so they comprise an important international student body in the UK. Further, Asian students have been observed to be shy and reserved in cross-cultural communication (Wright and Schartner 2013), so it is important to investigate to what extent students from such backgrounds make use of the L2 contact during SA, which can inform better structural support in students' transition to British higher education. In light of these gaps, three research questions (RQs) are put forward:

- RQ1: What are the patterns and changes of informal L2 contact among Chinese foundation year students in the UK over their first two terms?
- RQ2: What are the patterns and changes of the L2 social networks among Chinese foundation year students in the UK over their first two terms?
- RQ3: Do social network variables predict the amount of informal language contact of the participants?

3 Methods

3.1 The sample and research sites

The participants were accessed via a large education group, which ran foundation programs across the UK. Using non-probability sampling, two of the largest foundation centers in this group with primarily Chinese students were identified as suitable sites and several classes with B1-B2 proficiency students in year-long programs were recruited. 84 Chinese students participated in Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2) data collection. The two foundation centers are referred to as Center A ($n = 38$) and Center B ($n = 46$). Center A is located in University A in central London, whereas Center B is located in University B in the Midlands of England. Most students at Center A applied to universities with higher rankings than University A using IELTS scores, while all the students at Center B were guaranteed enrollment in University B for degree study provided that they passed all the in-house exams. 51.2% of the participants enrolled in pre-bachelor programs and 48.8% in pre-masters programs.

The participants' mean age was 20.94 years old ($SD = 2.55$), with an average length of stay of 4.78 months ($SD = 8.19$) at T1 and a median IELTS score of Overall Band 5.5 ($SD = 0.46$), suggesting B1–B2 level of English proficiency. Regarding accommodation, 43.8% of the students lived by themselves, 30% lived with their co-national friends and 26.3% lived with international friends. In these foundation programs, about 20–25 h of classes were scheduled every week during term time (e.g., IELTS, compulsory and elective modules, postgraduate skills & development, and tutorials).

Students attended English classes based on their levels and attended subject classes based on their proposed majors (e.g., humanities, engineering, finance & accounting). Information on student majors was not collected in the questionnaire, because their majors in the foundation program were relatively broad and, in reality, some may not relate to the major that students would pursue in their formal degree. 26 students were recruited for qualitative interviews at T1 and T2 and were sampled from a range of different classes. The interviewees are labeled according to their foundation center in this paper (i.e., the location of A/B + number).

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 The Language Contact Questionnaire (LCQ)

The present study adapted the LCQ, based on the LCP and the LEQ, to measure learners' average L2 use *in situ*. The LCQ was administered via Qualtrics in both Chinese and English (see Figure 1 for a screenshot). The order of the items follows the

Thank you for coming back! It has been three months since we did this survey last time. In this language contact questionnaire, we would like to know **how often you use English** in your spare time **in the UK**.

1. Read English books, newspaper, or magazines



A vertical list of six light gray rectangular buttons with rounded corners, each containing a frequency response option. The options are: never, rarely, sometimes, often, very regularly, and all the time.

never

rarely

sometimes

often

very regularly

all the time

Figure 1: Screenshot of the LCQ interface from mobile phone.

original LCP, from receptive activities to productive activities. To minimize learner fatigue, the LCQ only included 18 items, with 16 items covering L2 activities and two common L1-using activities as a comparison (i.e., using social media in L1 and speaking with co-national friends in L1). Items relating to the Internet and instant messaging were added, as per the LEQ. After interviewing some students during the piloting phase, “playing computer games in English”, which did not appear in the LEQ, was added. The objective frequency scale in the LEQ was adapted to a relative frequency scale, being *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often*, *very regularly*, *all the time* (coded 0–5 respectively), as these scales were less quantifiable but more reliable (Serrano et al. 2016). The final Cronbach’s alpha of the LCQ was higher than 0.80 (T1: 0.846, T2: 0.847), suggesting good internal reliability. The questionnaire also collected personal background information (e.g., IELTS scores, L2 motivation) at T1, to develop a profile of the participants.

3.2.2 The Study Abroad Social Network Survey (SASNS)

Surveys are a mainstream method to collect social network data, as data are collected under relative standardized conditions and only require a modest time commitment from participants (Marsden 2011). The SASNS is run on Amazon Web Service and can be opened as a webpage, to avoid the hassle of installing a new application. The software was tested multiple times from collecting data to exporting data, to detect software bugs and ensure that the instructions for each step were clear to the respondents.

The SASNS comprises five sections. The first part is an overview collecting the size of students’ L1 and L2 networks and the dispersion (social circles) of their L2 network (Figure 2). The pages of Part 2, titled “Friends”, depended on how many friends the respondent listed. This section collected information on up to five friends (Figure 2), a figure derived from ranges in existing literature (Isabelli-García 2006; Xie and Liu 2021; Zhou and Todman 2009) and modified after piloting. In Part 2, using a name generator, respondents were tasked with providing detailed information (gender, nationality, occasion of initial encounter, friendship intensity, friends’ English proficiency, contact frequency, etc.) about their friends. Most of these dimensions were adapted from the SASIQ or the SNQ.

Part 3, titled “Connections”, visualizes the connections between the respondents’ friends, collecting network density data (Figure 3). Part 4, titled “Activities” (Figure 3), and Part 5, titled “Topics” (Figure 3), followed the SNSS and measured L2 activity multiplexity and L2 topic multiplexity via the frequency sum of the activities and the breadth of conversation topics. Based on piloting, the little-mentioned topic “technology” was replaced by an often-mentioned topic “gossip”. Open-ended space was left at the end of Part 4 and Part 5, enabling respondents to add any unlisted activity

Social Network Survey 1.3

Select language

English

Hope you are keeping well during the COVID-19 outbreak. This survey is about your English-speaking friends in the UK. Please answer the question truthfully and your privacy will be protected.

How many friends do you have in the UK that speaks your first language?

Enter number

Now think about your **English-speaking** friends who meet ALL of the following conditions:

1. You have met each other in person. You know each other's name.
2. You have each other's contact detail (e.g. phone number/Facebook/WhatsApp).
3. They are not from your home country.

How many **English-speaking** friends (from the UK or other countries) do you have in the UK?

Enter number

How many **English-speaking** social circles (friendship groups) do you have? (e.g. classmates, flatmates)

Enter number

Continue

Friends

Please give the information of up to 5 closest English-speaking friends you have.

Name (can be first name or nickname)

Enter name

Gender

Male

How did you meet

We study together

How good is your relationship

Very good

Nationality

Select

Your friend's English proficiency

Lower than me

Frequency of face-to-face contact **in English outside of class**

Every day

Frequency of online contact **in English**

Every day

<Friend 1 of 1>

Delete friendAdd friendComplete

Figure 2: Part 1 and Part 2 of the SASNS.

Connections

Please link your friends who know each other. Tap their names to draw a line. Tap again to remove the line.

Natsumo

Polly

Jess

Heath

Is'van

Complete

Activities

You can skip this question if it does not apply to your current situation. Overall, have you done any of the following activities with your English-speaking friends in the **last month**? If yes, please put the number of times for each activity.

Share a meal

Enter number

Have coffee

Enter number

Go to gym or play a sport

Enter number

Play board games or cards

Enter number

Go shopping

Enter number

Topics

Overall, what topics have you discussed with your English-speaking friends out of class in the last month?

☐ Home country vs. British culture

☐ Celebrities

☐ Clothing and fashion

☐ Gossip

☐ Hobbies

☐ Holiday and travel

☐ Music

☐ Politics

☐ Sports

☐ Television and movies

☐ Problems I am having (e.g. being homesick)

Figure 3: Part 3, Part 4, and Part 5 of the SASNS.

or topic, which the researcher later added manually to the multiplexity figures. The coding protocol for the SASNS data will be shown in Section 3.4.

3.2.3 Semi-structured interview

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for the interview schedule) with a subsample of the participants at both timepoints. The questions focused on two aspects: their informal language contact and social networks. The interviews lasted for about 15 min, and some interview questions in Wright and Schartner (2013) for Chinese students in the UK were adopted. Students were given the autonomy to choose their preferred language for interview (Chinese/English), to allow for greater question comprehension and opinion expression (Rolland et al. 2019).

3.3 Procedure

Quantitative data collection took place in class at T1 (November 2019) and T2 (February 2020). Students started the program in late September 2019, so this schedule allowed students to settle in and establish some initial friendships before T1. Originally, a T3 data collection point was scheduled (May 2020) but could not be carried out in person due to the COVID-19 lockdown, so those data are not reported in this paper. The QR codes and shortened URL links for the LCQ and the SASNS were printed on a handout for students to access with their mobile phones. The interviews were arranged within a one-week window of the quantitative data collection, via contact details left by interested participants from the LCQ. All the interviews took place in a classroom or a student lounge on campus.

3.4 Analysis

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, after data screening, descriptive statistics were employed to illustrate patterns of language contact and social networks. The total score of the LCQ was calculated by adding up the frequency of all L2 items while the SASNS variables were coded based on the protocols below (Table 1). Paired-samples *t*-tests and Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests were performed on the LCQ and the SASNS respectively to illustrate the developmental profiles. Qualitative interview data were drawn on to elucidate more details of participants' language use and interpersonal relationships through thematic analysis. To answer RQ3, the social network variables were analyzed through regression models to explore possible predictors for the total LCQ scores.

Table 1: Coding protocol of SASNS network characteristics.

Variables	Types	Labels	Calculation	Range
Size (L1/English)	Interval	The number of friends	Exported from Part 1	0–50
Dispersion	Interval	The number of social groups	Exported from Part 1	0–10
Density	Interval	The number of connections among friends and with the respondent	Counted from Part 3	0–15
Frequency of contact (online)	Ordinal	•Less than once a month •Every month •Every week •Every day	The average value of listed friends from Part 2	•1 •2 •3 •4
Frequency of contact (offline)	Ordinal	•Less than once a month •Every month •Every week •Every day	The average value of listed friends from Part 2	•1 •2 •3 •4
Intensity	Ordinal	•Not very close •Just friends •Good •Very good	The average value of listed friends from Part 2	•1 •2 •3 •4
English proficiency of friends	Ordinal	•Worse than me •Similar to me •Better than me •Native	The average value of listed friends from Part 2	•1 •2 •3 •4
Activity multiplexity	Interval	The number of social activities the learner joined in a month	The sum of frequencies in Part 4	0–100
Topic multiplexity	Interval	The number of topics of conversation the learner had	The sum of chosen topics from Part 5	0–15

4 Results

4.1 RQ1: language contact

4.1.1 Quantitative data

Based on the normality check, both T1 and T2 overall LCQ scores were suitable for parametric analysis. Individual LCQ items are presented in the descending order of their frequency at T1 (Table 2). At both timepoints, activities with the highest frequencies were compulsory L2 activities, such as writing homework in English and speaking with service personnel in English, rather than voluntary leisure L2 activities. The frequency of L1 engagement was constantly high, suggesting strong L1 presence in the SA period.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the LCQ breakdown.

English-contact items (<i>n</i> = 084)	T1		T2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Writing homework	3.93	1.03	3.82	1.24
Speaking with L1 friends ^a	3.76	1.26	4.00	1.28
Speaking with service personnel	3.71	1.27	3.19	1.21
Speaking with international friends	3.25	1.40	2.74	1.34
Listening to songs	3.19	1.19	3.07	1.43
Using social media in L1 ^a	3.19	1.31	3.93	1.17
Using social media (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp)	2.88	1.47	2.44	1.55
Speaking with British friends	2.80	1.78	2.33	1.53
Writing emails	2.70	1.16	2.75	1.18
Watching movies	2.65	1.05	2.53	1.27
Listening to people's conversation	2.60	0.98	2.82	1.16
Reading timetables, menus, maps, announcements, etc	2.58	0.96	2.74	1.28
Watching YouTube or Netflix	2.38	1.22	2.35	1.33
Browsing websites	2.20	0.97	2.47	1.19
Watching TV	1.90	1.13	1.86	1.21
Playing computer or mobile games	1.89	1.42	1.86	1.68
Reading books, newspapers or magazines	1.70	0.82	1.60	0.98

Note: ^aL1–contact items. The rest are L2-contact items.

Regarding changes of language contact, paired-samples *t*-tests revealed that there was no statistically significant change in the overall LCQ scores from T1 (*M* = 38.41, *SD* = 9.45) to T2 (*M* = 36.92, *SD* = 11.41): *t* (79) = 1.533, *p* = 0.129, *n* = 80. In terms of individual LCQ items, after applying Bonferroni correction to prevent Type I error (*p* threshold: 0.05/18 = 0.003), three changes were statistically significant with large effect sizes. The frequency of using social media in L1 increased at T2: *t* (80) = 3.922, *p* < 0.001, partial η^2 = 0.16. On the contrary, the frequency of speaking with international friends [*t* (79) = −3.666, *p* < 0.001, partial η^2 = 0.15] and speaking with service personnel [*t* (79) = −3.413, *p* < 0.001, partial η^2 = 0.13] decreased at T2. This result suggested that although the overall frequency of L2 use remained stable, the sample steered towards their L1 in their spare time.

4.1.2 Qualitative data

Qualitative data not only aligned with quantitative data in showing dominant L1 use, but also revealed more fine-grained details of language contact. Above all, participants reported using more L1 than English in their spare time (77%, *n* = 20). For example,

In the school our class are all Chinese. Although in the beginning we said “no Chinese, only English in the class”, people are still speaking Chinese in the class because they are more comfortable to speak their own language. I haven’t met any foreign student in my class. I even met more foreigners in Beijing than here, so I am like: “Am I really abroad?” (B8)

This excerpt revealed that the homogeneous class demographics limited the English-speaking opportunities of the Chinese participants and it was impractical to engage in speaking English with co-national friends.

The activities that students used L2 for could be summarized into three categories: academic activities, leisure activities, and logistic/miscellaneous activities. An overarching theme seemed to be the compulsory nature of their informal L2 use. The interviewees reported a multitude of academic activities, such as speaking with teammates in group work ($n > 15$), writing emails to teachers and universities (A17), preparing for the IELTS exam (A14), reading textbooks (A9), and listening to BBC (A10), etc. Typically, more diligent students had more academic contact, and vice versa. The participants did such activities as either a requirement of the curriculum or following suggestions of their teachers to get higher grades, not voluntarily for their genuine interest. Most interviewees had more study time and less social time/free time at T2, because in British universities the second term of an academic year is usually the most intensive term. This may explain the *t*-test result that the overall L2 contact of the participants at T2 remained comparable to T1, although some L2 speaking contact decreased. 14 participants reported more academic L2 use due to course arrangement ($n = 7$) or IELTS preparation ($n = 7$). This was evidenced by comments at T2 like “last term we had one assignment and this term we have three assignments (B8)”, and also by remarks of them feeling “busy/busier” ($n = 5$) and “more tired” (A16) due to the coursework. The utilitarian goal seemed to be the key reason behind the increased L2 academic contact.

The second type of L2 contact (miscellaneous/logistics activities) included activities related to moving abroad, such as opening a bank account, registering with the General Practitioner, solving problems with the receptionist, and so forth. These activities required speaking English with strangers, which coincided with the high level of speaking frequency with service personnel in the LCQ at T1. As many logistic issues were already sorted during Term 1, at T2 students became more adept at handling miscellaneous activities with more confidence and struggled less when speaking with strangers.

Lastly, leisure activities included interactive L2 contact such as socializing with friends and receptive activities that participants enjoyed doing by themselves (e.g., watching movies, watching YouTube, listening to music, etc.). Their engagement in L2 leisure activities tended to be regular and habitual during the whole SA period, with large individual variations depending on interests and pastimes. For example,

in terms of socialization, a few interviewees with established English-speaking networks at T1 deepened their friendship at T2, while many others just gave up on making foreign friends (see details in Section 4.2) and focused on study instead.

4.2 RQ2: social networks

4.2.1 Quantitative data

The descriptive statistics of the social network data are displayed in Table 3. In general, the participants had more L1-speaking friends than foreign friends. They had two to three L2 social circles and relatively low network density. Based on the coding protocol (cf. Table 1), their relationship with the listed friends was quite good and their friends’ English proficiency was better than the respondents. They spoke to their friends offline and online every week. The social activities that they did most often in English were sharing meals and having coffee, while the topics that they discussed most often in English were schoolwork, home countries, and hobbies.

As for changes of social network, as none of the variables reached normal distribution, non-parametric tests (Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test) were used in the comparison of social network variables between T1 and T2. After Bonferroni correction (p threshold = $0.05/10 = 0.005$), none of the changes reached significance (see Appendix B), suggesting that the social integration level of the sample was consistently low during the first two terms of the SA period.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of network variables in the SASNS.

Variables ($n = 42$)	T1		T2	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Size of L1-speaking network ^a	16.03	15.67	17.29	14.70
Size of English-speaking network	5.94	8.82	5.29	7.47
Network dispersion	2.76	3.21	2.47	1.33
Network density	1.84	2.49	2.42	2.66
Friendship intensity	2.65	1.16	3.06	0.93
Friends’ proficiency	2.62	0.82	2.99	0.79
Frequency of face-to-face contact	3.08	1.01	2.80	0.97
Frequency of online contact	2.70	1.26	2.57	1.08
Multiplexity of activities	9.98	13.99	7.89	10.09
Multiplexity of topic	4.74	3.28	5.09	3.20

Note: ^aL1-network item. The rest are L2-network items.

4.2.2 Qualitative data

Qualitative data are presented according to the social network patterns of interviewees and longitudinal changes to these patterns. Above all, qualitative data corroborated quantitative data showing that the participants usually had more L1 friends than English-speaking friends ($n = 22$, 85%). Their typical social network pattern consisted of mainly L1 friends, some international friends, and few to no local British friends. Participant A13 reflected that there was “an invisible circle” that limited their communication, which echoes how Participant A25 described it: “The closest friends are Chinese. In the second round of my relationship, that is foreigner. In my classmate, there is Russian, Malaysian. We talk to each other in English. Because of some cultural difference, we cannot build close connection with each other to some extent”. This implied that students were aware which social group they belonged to and only made limited attempts to approach other non-L1 peers. The foundation students were highly segregated in their co-national peer bubble and their friendships with international peers were superficial and ephemeral.

Except for common reasons such as language barriers and cultural differences, Participant B3 speculated that Chinese students had low approachability to non-Chinese students: “because I am already surrounded by Chinese friends, foreign friends may feel your social circle is full already; they don’t wanna join...”. Thus, the strong L1-speaking peer presence might block some cross-cultural interaction opportunities for the Chinese students.

Generally speaking, the interviewees made friends with international classmates from the start of the term. They sometimes engaged in small talk before class and after class on academic topics, such as “assignment submission, the [assessment] scores, and revision” (B7). They rarely made plans with international friends outside the university, except for doing group work. Going to pubs ($n = 4$) and sharing meals ($n = 5$) were the most common leisure activities that they did following group work. It was less common for students to become friends with their international flatmates. Although some flatmates shared a kitchen, interviewees stated that they did not meet often or talk much due to different timetables. Three interviewees even reported unpleasant relationships with their foreign flatmates because of different living habits.

Between T1 and T2, the L2 social networks of the participants mostly remained unchanged but demonstrated large individual variations. On one hand, four Chinese interviewees had made close English-speaking contacts, either because of shared values with international friends from a similar cultural background ($n = 2$) or because of romantic relationship with British people ($n = 2$). For example, Participant A12 and A4 were close to a Korean classmate and a Malaysian classmate respectively.

They got along well because of similar life experiences (e.g., being older than other classmates, having studied abroad before) and mutual interests. Two participants with British boyfriends had previous cross-cultural experiences such as working with foreigners or having a Western boyfriend before. From T1 to T2, these interviewees maintained or deepened the relationship with their English-speaking friends or partners.

On the other hand, many other interviewees did not have English-speaking friends. For example, the person that Participant B7 spoke English most often with at T1 was a janitor who cleaned her room weekly, which revealed the sporadic and limited L2 interaction of some Chinese participants. From T1 to T2, these participants' L2 social networks did not develop in size or intensity, perhaps due to the peripheral importance of international friends, compared with their established networks.

Except for the above patterns, T2 interview data revealed that two interviewees expanded their L2 network in a limited scale, while one interviewee reported a shrink in L2 network size. The commonality of the two cases of friendship development was that the interviewees met their friends regularly because of university or work and their international friends were nice and approachable. For example, Participant B7 became close with a Hong Kong colleague and a British-born-Chinese colleague because they all worked at a Chinese supermarket. Participant A11 found her new teammates (one Arabic and one Italian) in a group project very nice and humorous, so they hung out every week.

On the contrary, Participant A13 was very sociable at T1 and went to different bars with international friends. However, his academic performance was poor, and his masters' application was rejected by a university. As a result, his daily routine completely changed at T2, in fear of not getting any offer: "I think the biggest change is that I put attention to my study rather than go outside... I reduced the time outside to have fun. I didn't care too much about study last term. This term I've started to begin. I feel very hard and exhausted."

This example demonstrated that Chinese foundation students' academic pressure directly affected their social life. Academic success obviously outweighed maintaining L2-speaking friendships. Passing the course and getting a university offer were their priority goals, as Participant A4 commented: "I don't have that energy to go out and meet new people. I think it's because I have stress about applying schools, so I don't want to go out. Even though I won't do anything at home, I will just feel guilty if I go out and have fun." This example underscored that the time invested in L2 socialization by the degree-seeking Chinese students abroad was influenced by the high stakes of their university applications.

4.3 RQ3: the relationship between language contact and social networks

4.3.1 Quantitative data

Hierarchical regression with students' IELTS scores and motivation in Block 1 and social network variables in Block 2 did not converge ($p > 0.05$), so standard regression was employed to explore whether any of the ten social network variables could predict the total amount of L2 contact alone. Before the analysis, a few assumptions were checked. It should be recognized that the Chinese students' sample sizes at T1 and T2 did not meet the satisfactory sample size of $n > 50 + 8m$ for regression analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell 2013). Thus, it was decided to apply Bonferroni correction (p threshold: $0.05/10 = 0.005$) to the results to mitigate the chances of Type I error.

For T1, the regression model was significant [$F(10,60) = 2.977, p = 0.004$], with an R^2 of 0.332 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.220$). The multiplexity of topics that the participants discussed in English could predict the total LCQ scores (Table 4). At T2, the model was also significant [$F(10,87) = 4.232, p < 0.001$], with an R^2 of 0.327 (adjusted $R^2 = 0.250$). Participants' online contact frequency was a significant predictor, with more frequent online contact suggesting higher L2 use (Table 5).

Table 4: Significant social network predictors of total language contact at T1.

Model	B	SE	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	36.715	6.590		5.571	0.000
Topic multiplexity	1.122	0.389	0.393	2.886	0.005 ^a
Online contact frequency	2.449	0.984	0.303	2.490	0.016

Note: ^aindicates significance after Bonferroni correction.

Table 5: Significant social network predictors of total language contact at T2.

Model	B	SE	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	21.992	6.382		3.446	0.001
Online contact frequency	3.123	1.069	0.299	2.920	0.004 ^a
Face-to-face contact frequency	-2.447	1.071	-0.208	-2.285	0.025
Topic multiplexity	0.788	0.348	0.229	2.266	0.026
Network density	1.471	0.679	0.210	2.167	0.033

Note: ^aindicates significance after Bonferroni correction.

4.3.2 Qualitative data

Qualitative data did not directly explain the significant social network predictors of language contact, but it was found that those with higher quality of English-speaking friendships did have higher amount of L2 use, especially interactive language contact. For instance, Participant A12 reflected that because he “luckily made a group of international friends in the beginning [of the term]”, he had “received the maximum amount of English contact available”. Likewise, Participant B1 associated higher English use at T2 with going to the pub and talking to people in English. In contrast, those who rarely had chances to speak English expressed dissatisfaction with their low frequency of L2 use. For instance, because of the lack of English-speaking friends, some participants reported speaking “95%–100% Chinese in daily life” (B6).

5 Discussion

5.1 RQ1: patterns and changes of informal L2 contact

Overall, the present study found that most Chinese foundation students used L1 more than L2 in their spare time, which aligns with existing studies on the prevalence of L1 use during SA (Gao 2017; Kinginger 2008; Trentman 2013; Wright and Schartner 2013). It is suggested that although SA could be an input-rich L2 learning environment in which L2 speaking opportunities abound, these participants did not make sufficient use of this rich context for their benefit.

What deserves attention from the language contact data is the high proportion of academic-related L2 contact of the Chinese students, which emerges from a range of contextual factors, learner traits, and program features. In terms of contextual factors, due to the change of geopolitical landscape during the Trump administration, many Chinese students could not obtain visas to study in the US and they applied to British universities instead (Lou 2021). As a result, applicants strived for better academic records due to increased competition. As for learner traits, Chinese students studying abroad usually had high academic stress, because of culture and education disparities between China and the SA destination, their language deficiencies, and their own motivations for achievement (Yan and Berliner 2009). It should be noted that for the current sample, many Chinese participants relied on external pressure to use English in their free time, instead of language use being voluntary and natural. Thus, the high proportion of academic contact meant that their level of interactive English contact was even less than their written English contact.

Lastly, this finding underscored the influence of SA programs on the L2 contact of the participants. Hernández (2010) and Trentman (2013) found that American exchange students studying abroad in Spain and Egypt spent at least double the time speaking the L2 than writing homework in the L2. British exchange students in France also reported infrequency of “reading academic texts” (McManus et al. 2014, p. 108) during SA. As Gautier (2019, p. 231) interpreted, American exchange students were “fairly relaxed” during SA and considered it “a year of vacation”, while Chinese learners pursuing degrees abroad considered SA as a high-stakes investment. It could be inferred that full degree study abroad is more likely to yield high receptive L2 contact, because the courses are reading-intensive and lecture-based. In the current study, the Chinese participants in Center B and their counterparts in Center A had slightly different preoccupations regarding academic study (IELTS and coursework), showing the direct influence of admission policies on language contact.

In terms of changes in language contact, the significant increase in the L1 social media use and the significant decrease in speaking contact with international friends at T2 could first be explained by a contextual factor. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in China in January 2020, many Chinese participants shifted their attention from building connections in the host country to following the news and caring for their families in their home country through social media, trading off the time and efforts invested in international friendships. During normal times, however, an L2 decline was also observed in the language contact pattern in García-Amaya (2017) and Taguchi (2008), showing the difficulty of maintaining the L2-using momentum. In the present study, it was speculated that at T2, the excitement of meeting multicultural friends in a new environment wore off over time as cultural barriers emerged. As one explanation of this, “L2 learners who did not share common interests with their classmates may have struggled to develop new topics of conversation beyond the initial acquaintance” (García-Amaya 2017, p. 69). The significant decrease in talking to service personnel could be attributed to the fact that students had settled in and did not have as much difficulty or need for one-on-one assistance when using services, hence lowering the frequency of speaking English with service personnel.

5.2 RQ2: patterns and changes of L2 social networks

Notably, the social network pattern from this study revealed superficial and weak relationships with international friends and the absence of a vibrant international student community, which was different from SA students in other studies who formed a bonded international group (Mitchell 2015; Schartner 2015; Xie and Liu 2021). The participants in those studies usually had high L2 proficiency, high L2 motivation, and strong cross-cultural adaptability, so the current findings might be

more applicable to the mass Chinese student population in the UK who are typified in foundation classes as having lower English proficiency and pragmatic SA motivation.

Other aspects of the social networks of the participants largely corroborate existing research on the strong co-national segregation and the difficulties of making host-national friends (Brown 2008; Furnham and Alibhai 1985; Gao 2017; Isabelli-García 2006; Mikal et al. 2015; Tanaka 2007; Wright and Scharfner 2013). In other words, regular engagement in high-quality interactions with native speakers occurred relatively infrequently (Baker-Smemoe et al. 2014). The friendship pattern of the participants was in line with the concentric model by Coleman (2013), which consisted of closest co-national friends, some multi-national friends and few local acquaintances. The foundation year did not accelerate learners' acculturation process. Rather, the students took it as a "buffer" year for academic adaptation and did not make extra efforts to look for local connections after some initial attempts. The current study echoes the mental adjustment found by Mikal et al. (2015, p. 218) that "the strong Chinese community, coupled with difficulties connecting with Americans, resulted in many Chinese students abandoning their cultural and language goals in favor of a focus on more purely academic endeavors".

The few successes in building close cross-cultural relationships in this study could be due to two reasons. First, the formation of social relationships followed the principle of homophily, a sociology term which means similar individuals tend to move towards each other and act in a similar manner (McPherson et al. 2001). Participant A12 and Participant A4 became close friends with contacts from adjacent countries (China–Korea, China–Malaysian) with similar life experiences. It can be inferred that forming close relationships with international friends from similar cultural backgrounds is possible during SA given the right circumstances, which could boost using English as a *Lingua Franca* during SA (ELFSA) (Köylü 2023). Second, romantic attraction cannot be overlooked. Coleman (2015, p. 43) pointed out that "published research hardly mentions sexual attraction and relationships, yet there is overwhelming first-hand evidence that millions of fun-loving, novelty-seeking, outward-looking, bright, adventurous young people" get into intimate personal relationships.

In terms of the changes of social networks, as Coleman (2013, p. 31) summarized, "study abroad socialization may develop or fossilize". In the present study, fossilization was more often the case regarding L2 social networks. The reasons behind it could be traced back to the cultural barriers and linguistic challenges associated with hanging out with L2-speaking friends. In this study, the few breakthroughs in L2 friendship happened as a result of common goals and contexts, such as working in a Chinese supermarket (B7) and doing a group project together (A11). These pre-conditions created opportunities for regular meetups and in turn led to deeper mutual understanding, which contributes to friendship formation (Pettigrew 1998).

5.3 RQ3: social network predictors of language contact

This study identified the predictive power of social networks on informal L2 contact. Topic multiplexity could predict the amount of informal L2 contact at T1, probably because in the initial stage, this variable represented the diversity of social engagement and the depth of conversations in L2 socialization. Those who only had routinized greetings with their foreign classmates could not touch upon many topics in their conversations. Therefore, it can be inferred that the students who talked to many new people about different topics had better speaking competence and higher frequency of L2 use in general.

As for T2, the reason why online contact frequency could predict total L2 contact might be attributed to the fact that using instant messaging apps (e.g., Facebook messenger, WhatsApp) happens more often between friends rather than between acquaintances. Research on students' social networking showed that "strong ties" used all communication media at their disposal to connect with each other, while students who were "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973) started from face-to-face communication and only added each other on social network sites as the ties grew stronger (Van Cleemput 2010). Thus, those with high online L2 contact frequency either had already established enduring friendships with previously met L2-speaking friends or had made close L2-speaking friends in the foundation program. If most respondents reported similar frequency of face-to-face contact with international classmates from the weekly classes, those with higher online L2 contact frequency could be the ones that felt more comfortable with using L2 for interaction and had higher informal L2 use.

6 Conclusions

Chinese foundation students in the UK had an extra year of transition in the host country, but this study found that their priority was academic preparation, instead of social integration. This study illustrates a situation of low L2 use and weak L2 social relationships among Chinese foundation students in the UK and reveals little change in their overall language contact and social networks over two terms with large individual variations. The result indicated that many participants accepted their "L1 bubble" and placed emphasis on compulsory commitments associated with academic performance and degree completion (Mikal et al. 2015). These findings may be applied to other academically disadvantaged degree-seeking Chinese students in the UK. This study also identified that L2 topic multiplexity and online L2 contact

frequency with friends could predict the amount of L2 contact of the participants, suggesting that higher quality of L2 networks could be weakly associated with more informal L2 contact.

Three implications are proposed based on the findings. Firstly, a realistic expectation should be formed by Chinese students prior to seeking a degree abroad. If their goal is just to receive the degree, they could expect a high percentage of academic English use and frequent L1 use in their daily life. Achieving in-depth integration into the local community will require extraordinary cross-cultural awareness and time management skills. They also need to be prepared to trade off some time away from study. The second implication concerns the foundation program curriculum. Except for academic modules, interventions such as workshops/seminars on cross-cultural adaptation and networking could be offered to international students, to make full use of this transition period and lay a firm foundation for their SA experience. Lastly, as friendship establishment follows the principle of homophily, the foundation centers could organize clubs and interest groups based on common hobbies (e.g., movie club, gaming club) to encourage friendship formation. Therefore, students from different countries with similar interests could find each other more easily through such activities.

Despite its various contributions, this study has a number of limitations. Firstly, this study suffered from participant attrition because some high-proficiency students at Center B were exempted from the English classes at T2. Therefore, the longitudinal sample lost some participants with higher L2 proficiency. Secondly, as the researcher did not have regular access to the research sites, extensive observation or field notes could not be taken. In the future, deeper collaborations with practitioners could be forged to collect more fine-grained data about the SA life of the participants. Thirdly, it is possible that the participants who volunteered to be interviewed tended to be more motivated or open-minded. Thus, less qualitative data were obtained from the more reserved participants. Lastly, due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the T3 data collection was affected, which shortened the tracking period reported in this paper. Future studies could be conducted to reveal new insights into the post-COVID social networking of international students.

Acknowledgments: We acknowledge the great help from the Head of English of a British education group for granting the first author access to the participants. We thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments to this paper. Credit also goes to an Oxford University alumnus John Fraser for developing the social network software for this study. The first author of this paper would also like to thank her husband for his unconditional support during her PhD study.

References

- Baker-Smemoe, Wendy, Dan P. Dewey, Jennifer Bown & Rob A. Martinsen. 2014. Variables affecting L2 gains during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals* 47(3). 464–486.
- Beerkens, Maarja, Manuel Souto-Otero, Hans de Wit & Jeroen Huisman. 2016. Similar students and different countries? An analysis of the barriers and drivers for Erasmus participation in seven countries. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 20(2). 184–204.
- Briggs Baffoe-Djan, Jessica G. & Siyang Zhou. 2020. Close encounters of the third kind: Quantity, type and quality of language contact during study abroad. In Martin Howard (ed.), *Study abroad and the second language learner: Expectations, experiences and development*, 69–90. London: Bloomsbury.
- Brown, Lorraine. 2008. Language and anxiety: An ethnographic study of international postgraduate students. *Evaluation & Research in Education* 21(2). 75–95.
- Coleman, James A. 2013. Researching whole people and whole lives. In Celeste Kinginger (ed.), *Social and cultural aspects of language learning in study abroad*, 17–44. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Coleman, James A. 2015. Social circles during residence abroad: What students do, and who with. In Rosamond Mitchell, Nicole Tracy-Ventura & Kevin McManus (eds.), *Social interaction, identity and language learning during residence abroad*, 33–52. Amsterdam: EuroSLA Monographs Series 4.
- Dewaele, Jean-Marc. 2012. Personality in second language acquisition. In Carol A. Chapelle (ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell/Wiley.
- Dewey, Dan P. 2017. Measuring social interaction during study abroad: Quantitative methods and challenges. *System* 71. 49–59.
- Dewey, Dan P., R. Kirk Belnap & Rebecca Hillstrom. 2013. Social network development, language use, and language acquisition during study abroad: Arabic language learners' perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 22. 84–110.
- Dewey, Dan P., Jennifer Bown, Wendy Baker, Rob A. Martinsen, Carrie Gold & Dennis Eggett. 2014. Language use in six study abroad programs: An exploratory analysis of possible predictors. *Language Learning* 64(1). 36–71.
- Doerr, Neriko Musha. 2016. Chronotopes of study abroad: The cultural other, immersion, and compartmentalized space–time. *Journal of Cultural Geography* 33(1). 80–99.
- Dörnyei, Zoltán, Valerie Durow & Khawla Zahran. 2004. Individual differences and their effects on formulaic sequence acquisition. In Norbert Schmitt (ed.), *Formulaic sequences: Acquisition, processing and use*, 87–106. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Durbidge, Levi. 2019. Technology and L2 engagement in study abroad: Enabler or immersion breaker? *System* 80. 224–234.
- Finlayson, Adam. 2019. *Preparing for degree study: Analysis of Access to Higher Education Diplomas and integrated foundation year courses (OfS 2019.20)*. London: Office for Students.
- Freed, Barbara F., Dan P. Dewey, Norman Segalowitz & Randall Halter. 2004. The language contact profile. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 26(2). 349–356.
- Furnham, Adrian & Naznin Alibhai. 1985. The friendship networks of foreign students: A replication and extension of the functional model. *International Journal of Psychology* 20(3–4). 709–722.
- Gao, Feng. 2017. Negotiating participation in the local English-speaking community: A case study of Chinese learners in Britain. *Cambridge Journal of China Studies* 12(3). 45–63.
- García-Amaya, Lorenzo. 2017. Detailing L1 and L2 use in study-abroad research: Data from the daily linguistic questionnaire. *System* 71. 60–72.
- García-Amaya, Lorenzo. 2021. Exploring the connection between language use and oral performance during study abroad: Results from the Daily Language Questionnaire 2. *Foreign Language Annals* 55(1). 1–24.

- Gautier, Rozenn. 2019. Understanding socialisation and integration through social network analysis: American and Chinese students during a stay abroad. In Martin Howard (ed.), *Study abroad, second language acquisition and interculturality*, 207–236. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78(6). 1360–1380.
- Hendrickson, Blake. 2018. Intercultural connectors: Explaining the influence of extra-curricular activities and tutor programs on international student friendship network development. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 63. 1–16.
- Hernández, Todd A. 2010. The relationship among motivation, interaction, and the development of second language oral proficiency in a study-abroad context. *The Modern Language Journal* 94(4). 600–617.
- Ife, Anne. 2000. Language learning and residence abroad: How self-directed are students? *Language Learning Journal* 22(1). 30–37.
- Isabelli-García, Christina L. 2006. Study abroad social networks, motivation and attitudes: Implications for second language acquisition. In Margaret A. DuFon & Eton Churchill (eds.), *Language learners in study abroad contexts*, 231–358. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Kennedy Terry, Kristen M. 2017. Contact, context, and collocation: The emergence of sociostylistic variation in L2 French learners during study abroad. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 39(3). 553–578.
- Kinginger, Celeste. 2008. Language learning in study abroad: Case studies of Americans in France. *The Modern Language Journal* 92(1). 1–124.
- Kinginger, Celeste & Géraldine Blattner. 2009. Histories of engagement and sociolinguistic awareness in study abroad: Colloquial French. In Lourdes Ortega & Heidi Byrnes (eds.), *The longitudinal study of advanced L2 capacities*, 223–246. London: Routledge.
- Köylü, Zeynep. 2023. The ERASMUS sojourn: Does the destination country or pre-departure proficiency impact oral proficiency gains? *Language Learning Journal* 51(1). 48–60.
- Kubota, Ryuko. 2016. The social imaginary of study abroad: Complexities and contradictions. *Language Learning Journal* 44(3). 347–357.
- Lou, Kang. 2021. 216,000 Chinese students study in UK as a result of US visa restrictions. *Global Times*. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1224057.shtml>.
- Magnan, Sally S. & Michele Back. 2007. Social interaction and linguistic gain during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals* 40(1). 43–61.
- Martinsen, Rob A., Wendy Baker, Dan P. Dewey, Jennifer Bown & Cary Johnson. 2010. Exploring diverse settings for language acquisition and use: Comparing study abroad, service learning abroad, and foreign language housing. *Applied Language Learning* 20. 45–69.
- McManus, Kevin, Rosamond Mitchell & Nicole Tracy-Ventura. 2014. Understanding insertion and integration in a study abroad context: The case of English-speaking sojourners in France. *Revue Française de Linguistique Appliquée* 19(2). 97–116.
- McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin & James M. Cook. 2001. Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27(1). 415–444.
- Mikal, Jude P., Junhong Yang & Amy Lewis. 2015. Surfing USA: How Internet use prior to and during study abroad affects Chinese students' stress, integration, and cultural learning while in the United States. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 19(3). 203–224.
- Mitchell, Rosamond. 2015. The development of social relations during residence abroad. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 9(1). 22–33.
- Murphy-Lejeune, Elizabeth. 2001. *Student mobility and narrative in Europe: The new strangers*. London: Routledge.
- Marsden, Peter V. 2011. Survey methods for network data. In John Scott & Peter J. Carrington (eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social network analysis*, 370–388. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Pettigrew, Thomas F. 1998. Intergroup contact theory. *Annual Review of Psychology* 49(1). 65–85.

- Rolland, Louise, Jean-Marc Dewaele & Beverley Costa. 2019. Planning and conducting ethical interviews. In Jim McKinley & Heath Rose (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics*, 1st edn., 279–289. London: Routledge.
- Schartner, Alina. 2015. ‘You cannot talk with all of the strangers in a pub’: A longitudinal case study of international postgraduate students’ social ties at a British university. *Higher Education* 69(2). 225–241.
- Segalowitz, Norman & Barbara F. Freed. 2004. Context, contact, and cognition in oral fluency acquisition: Learning Spanish in at home and study abroad contexts. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 26(2). 173–199.
- Serrano, Raquel, Àngels Llanes & Elsa Tragant. 2016. Examining L2 development in two short-term intensive programs for teenagers: Study abroad vs. “at home”. *System* 57. 43–54.
- Study International. 2018. *Which country is home to the largest international student population?* Study International. Available at: <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/country-home-largest-international-student-population/>.
- Tabachnick, Barbara & Linda Fidell. 2013. *Using multivariate statistics*, 6th edn. London: Pearson.
- Taguchi, Naoko. 2008. Cognition, language contact, and the development of pragmatic comprehension in a study-abroad context. *Language Learning* 58(1). 33–71.
- Taguchi, Naoko, Feng Xiao & Shuai Li. 2016. Effects of intercultural competence and social contact on speech act production in a Chinese study abroad context. *The Modern Language Journal* 100(4). 775–796.
- Tanaka, Koichi. 2007. Japanese students’ contact with English outside the classroom during study abroad. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics* 13(1). 36–54.
- Trentman, Emma. 2013. Arabic and English during study abroad in Cairo, Egypt: Issues of access and use. *The Modern Language Journal* 97(2). 457–473.
- Van Cleemput, Katrien. 2010. “I’ll See You on IM, Text, or Call You”: A social network approach of adolescents’ use of communication media. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30(2). 75–85.
- Wilkinson, Sharon. 1998. On the nature of immersion during study abroad: Some participant perspectives. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 4(1). 121–138.
- Wright, Clare & Alina Schartner. 2013. ‘I can’t ... I won’t?’ International students at the threshold of social interaction. *Journal of Research in International Education* 12(2). 113–128.
- Xie, Yushan & Yongcan Liu. 2021. Who do you hang out with?: How Chinese students’ social networks relate to their perceived oral proficiency gains during study abroad experiences. *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education* 6(1). 59–90.
- Yan, Kun & David C. Berliner. 2009. Chinese international students’ academic stressors in the United States. *College Student Journal* 43(4). 939–960.
- Zhou, Siyang & Jessica G. Briggs Baffoe-Djan. 2023. “You just picked it up.” The informal language contact and phrasal verb knowledge among international students in the UK. *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education* 8(1). 145–179.
- Zhou, Yuefang & John Todman. 2009. Patterns of adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13(4). 467–486.

Supplementary Material: This article contains supplementary material (<https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2022-0042>).