

Academic and linguistic gains during a semester-long study abroad: A cohort case study¹

Wei Cai

Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
caiwei@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn

Xiangrong Li

Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
leexr@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn

Meihua Liu

Tsinghua University, Beijing, China
ellenmh@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present case study investigated university students' academic and linguistic gains during a semester-long exchange program abroad. Thirty three third-year English majors from a Chinese university answered a battery of questionnaires and 13 of them participated in semi-structured interviews both prior to and after the program. Analyses of the data showed that the participants gained greatly from the exchange program both academically and linguistically. Based on the findings, some implications about exchange programs are discussed.

Keywords: gain, exchange program, academic, linguistic

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Increasingly, tertiary-level students across the globe are gaining some form of international education, because it is generally believed that study abroad (SA) facilitates the learning and acquisition of the target language and culture (Allen & Herron, 2003; Huebner, 1995; Isabelli, 2007; Kinginger, 2008; Lafford, 2010; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011; Sasaki 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Serrano, Llanes, & Tragant, 2011). Consequently, SA has caught increasing attention from educators and researchers around the globe. In recent decades, East Asian students have increasingly become the majority of international students on university campuses (Xia, 2009). However, research on SA has been scarcely reported, except that in Hong Kong contexts (Jackson, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014). It is especially so in Mainland China, where increasingly more institutions of higher education have realized the importance of international education and joined exchange programs in recent years. To fill in this gap, the present study, situated in a Chinese university EFL context, aims to examine intermediate-to-advanced English learners' academic and linguistic gains during a semester long study abroad.

Literature Review

An increasing number of linguists have examined second/foreign language (SL/FL) learning and acquisition within Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural framework (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Pavlenko, 1998; Storch, 2002). A primary tenet of the sociocultural theory is that higher forms of cognitive development originate first in the social world, in interaction between individuals before they are internalized and that each individual's functional system is shaped essentially by his/her experiences and interactions with the surrounding community (Vygotsky, 1978). During this whole process, language is considered the primary mediating artifact through which speakers engage in social interactions (Jimenez, 2003) and the individual is considered a social being situated within a particular cultural and historical context (Shively, 2008). Thus, different types and degrees of participation in a certain community (e.g., the target language community) determine how well the speaker needs to control the new mediating language in order to achieve his/her goals/motives (Jimenez, 2003). Thus, the individual's target language proficiency is never static and changes all the time as his/her degree of participation and interaction changes (Shively, 2008). Then, what happens to an individual when s/he becomes immersed in a different linguistic and cultural environment, such as an SA context?

A number of studies in the past two decades have indicated that SA students do not always experience the intense exposure to the target language and the accompanying gains in language proficiency that were once assumed

(Isabelli-García, 2010; Pelligrino, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). For example, to describe the acquisition rate for gender acquisition in Spanish and explore whether individual variability and language contact might affect this rate, Isabelli-García (2010) recruited 12 intermediate English learners of Spanish in the SA and at-home contexts respectively over a 4-month period. The results showed that no difference existed between the two learning contexts and that social behavior and language contact abroad had minimal influence on the acquisition rate.

Even so, to most researchers and language educators, the SA context constitutes a rich environment for language and culture learning. Research has shown immersion in the target culture is of great value in fostering acquisition of SL/FL skills in listening, reading and writing, and especially in speaking (Isabelli, 2007; Jackson, 2008, 2010; Kinginger, 2008; Lafford, 2010; Lindseth, 2010; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007; Martinsen, 2008; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Serrano et al., 2011; Smartt & Scudder, 2004). DeKeyser (2007) claimed that learning the SL abroad provided more opportunities for practice in real-life situations and thus automatization of SL skills. Hernández (2010) investigated 20 1-semester study abroad students and found that students improved their L2 speaking proficiency during SA and that student contact with the target language had a significant effect on their speaking improvement. Thus, the researcher believed it important to focus on learning activities that enhance students' integrative motivation and interaction with the L2 culture in both the formal classroom ("at home") and in the SA program.

Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau's (2011) studied 55 Catalan/Spanish EFL undergraduates who spent a 3-month sojourn in an English-speaking university. They found that SA benefits surpassed those benefits obtained as an effect of formal instruction in the domains of fluency, both oral and written, oral accuracy and formulaic language, and written lexical complexity. Yashima and Zenk-Nishide (2008) analyzed the effects of learning contexts on proficiency development as well as attitudinal and behavioral changes. Two cohorts of 165 students enrolled in two different courses, of whom 16 joined a 10-month SA program in various English-speaking countries, participated in the study. The results indicated that the SA group demonstrated a clear advantage in all of the indicators over groups who stayed home.

Sasaki (2007) compared the changes in English writing behavior of 7 Japanese university students (the SA group) who spent 4 to 9 months in English-speaking countries with those of 6 counterparts majoring in British and American studies (the at-home group) who remained in Japan. After a 1-year observation period, the researcher found that only those in the SA group improved their SL writing ability and fluency, made more local plans, and became more motivated to write better L2 compositions. These findings were partially sup-

ported by Lord's (2009) case study of one participant's written production to investigate the processes of the 1-year SA and L2 acquisition.

As such, it is clear that SA generally facilitates the learning and acquisition of an SL/FL. This may be the exact reason why more and more institutions of higher education are joining exchange programs around the world. However, though SA programs have become increasingly popular and have caught the attention of increasingly more and more researchers worldwide, they have been the focus of interest of relatively few researchers in Asian contexts. As more and more Chinese institutions and students of higher education are involved in exchange programs, research is urgently called for in this area to examine what benefits SA programs may have, how to prepare students who are going abroad to maximize their time abroad, and how to sustain their gains after the exchange experience. The interest in collecting data from students in a prestigious university in Beijing, China, which has been sending increasingly more students abroad on exchange programs, has motivated the present study, part of which is reported in the present paper. The examination of Chinese learners' linguistic and academic gains while staying abroad can throw some light on the variability that has been observed in previous research. The particular questions for the present research are:

1. What are the students' perceived academic gains during one semester's study abroad?
2. What are the students' perceived linguistic gains during one semester's study abroad?

In the present paper, academic gains referred to gains in school work, seminar and research skills, and intellectuality, while linguistic gains referred to gains in different aspects of English, both formal and informal.

Research Design

This study examined the perceived academic and linguistic gains of 33 intermediate to advanced learners of English from a prestigious university in Mainland China who joined a semester long study abroad program in English speaking countries.

Survey Respondents

Thirty-three (1 male and 32 female) 3rd-year intermediate to advanced English majors from a prestigious university in Beijing answered a battery of

questionnaires in the present study. They all went abroad as exchange students during the first term (fall) of their third academic year at university. With an age range of 18 to 21, their average age was 19.7. Among these students, 22 (66.7%) had never been abroad, and the others except Gong had stayed abroad for varying lengths ranging from 10 days to 1 year. The exception was Gong who had lived in Japan for 7 years since she was 5. With an average of 8.91 years spent in learning English, all the survey respondents went to English speaking countries as exchange students.

Interview Respondents

Thirteen females of the 33 survey respondents participated in the semi-structured interviews, 8 of whom had been abroad for varying durations of time and 3 had been to their host country on an exchange program in the middle school, as presented in Table 1 (all the names were pseudo to protect their privacy).

Prior to the SA, Gong had lived in Japan for seven years when small, homestay in America for 2 weeks in the middle school, spent 1 week in South Korea on a program for university students, and 1 month in Turkey on a program as a volunteer teacher of English to beginners. Having stayed in different cultures made Gong *“more desirable to know different places in the world and more confident to adapt to various environments.”* Peng, Xiao and Han had studied and travelled in America for 1 month in middle school. And the other 4 who had been abroad had traveled or stayed in such countries as Australia, South Korea, Britain and Spain for 10-15 days on programs for university students. Because of these experiences abroad, they reported having improved their English, known more about the local cultures (Gong, Han, & Peng), (greatly) enhanced their interest in English (Xiang & Peng) and motivation (Xiao) to go abroad, and understood more about the differences between China and other countries in different aspects (Gao).

During the SA, 4 (30.8%) of the 13 sojourners lived in school accommodations with other international students and thus used English also when at home. All the others shared a room on campus or an apartment off campus with other Chinese students and thus spoke Chinese when at home. During their free time, 3 (23.1%) mainly socialized with other international students, 2 (15.1%) with local students, and the others with mixed students—internationals, Chinese and local students, depending on what activity they were involved in. When traveling in the host city or country, their companions were predominantly Chinese because it was easier to communicate and get along with them, as reported in the post-sojourn interviews.

Table 1 Detailed information about the interviewees ($N = 13$)

Interviewees	Had been abroad before?	Host country during the SA	Accommodation during the SA	People they were with most during the SA	Travel during the SA
Li	Yes (Spain)	Britain	Rented	Mixed	Yes
Peng	Yes (America, South Korea, Spain)	America	Rented	Mixed	Yes
Gong	Yes (Japan, South Korea, Turkey)	America	Sa	Internationals	Yes
Gao	Yes (Australia, European countries, Cambodia)	America	Rented	Mixed	Yes
Xiao	Yes (Aermica, European countires)	Britain	Sa	Locals & internationals	Yes
Han Ning	Yes (America) Yes (South Korea, Russia, Britain)	Canada America	Rented Sa	Mixed Internationals	Yes Yes
Pan Min	Yes (Australia) No	France Canada	Rented Rented	Mixed Mixed	Yes Yes
Yong	No	Australia	Sa	Internationals	Yes
Deng	No	America	Rented	Locals	Yes
Ye	No	Canada	Rented	Mixed	Yes
Tang	No	America	Rented	Mixed	Yes

Note. Sa = school accommodation

Instruments

The data in the present study were collected via pre- and post-sojourn surveys, and pre- and post-sojourn semi-structured interviews, as detailed below.

Pre-Sojourn International Exchange Survey. The 97-item mixed form Pre-Sojourn International Exchange Survey was adapted from that used in Jackson (2010) to gather data about the participants' background, liberal education, L2 proficiency/use, intercultural contact/travel experiences, attitude towards home/host/other cultures/identity, aims/reasons for going on exchange, sojourn learning, self-rated abilities the native language and the target language, academic achievements, self-perceived difficulties while abroad, self-perceived preparation of the coming study abroad, and personal comments about the program.

Post-Sojourn International Exchange Survey. The 71-item mixed form Post-Sojourn International Exchange Survey was adapted from that used in Jackson (2010), which mainly covered the following aspects: demographic data, accommodation while abroad, gains from the exchange program, difficulties and challenges during SA, self-perceived importance of the exchange program, self-rated proficiency in the medium language used in the courses while abroad, and personal comments on the exchange program.

Pre-Sojourn Interview Guide. This 55-item Pre-Sojourn Interview Guide was adapted from that used in Jackson (2010) which involved the following aspects of the participants' ideas of the exchange program: background information and motivation to study abroad, goals and expectations of the program, attitudes toward and participation in service learning during SA, current intercultural contact/intercultural communication skills, current identity, previous travel or study abroad, level of preparedness for SA, language usage during SA, journal writing, and future plans.

Post-Sojourn Interview Guide. This 94-item Post-Sojourn Interview Guide was adapted from that used in Jackson (2010), which involved the following aspects of the participants' ideas of the exchange program: overall impression, residence abroad, academic/intellectual development, free time, extracurricular activities & travel while abroad, intercultural adjustment and learning/intercultural communication skills, personal/social development, identity, linguistic development/usage, pre-sojourn preparation for life/study abroad, service-learning while abroad, reentry, current intercultural contact/intercultural and global education, and future plans.

Procedure

The present study was conducted during the first semester of the students' third academic year but actually lasted more than a semester. Both the pre-sojourn survey and interview were done 2 months prior to the students' leaving for their host universities in late August or early September because they would spend the summer holiday (mid July to late August) at home. Both the post-sojourn survey and interview were conducted within a month after they came back. Each survey took the students about 25 min and each interview lasted for about 1.5 to 2 hrs, which was tape-recorded. All the survey items were presented to the students in both Chinese and English to avoid any misunderstanding. Chinese was predominantly used during the interviews for the sake of the ease in expressing ideas, with occasional use of English when the speakers liked to.

Data Analysis

All the survey data were analyzed using SPSS 20 in terms of mean and standard deviation. All the interview data were transcribed and subjected to open coding to identify recurrent themes and issues (Charmaz, 2006; Richards, 2009). All the sources were triangulated when presenting the results.

Results

In the present study, all the items assessing the students' perceived academic and linguistic gains were placed on a 5-point Likert scale with values of 1-5 assigned to each of the five descriptors respectively. Thus, the higher a score on an item, the greater the students' perceived gain was.

Academic Gains

Analyses of the post-sojourn survey data showed that the mean for each academic gain item ranged from 3.44 to 4.56 ($SD = 0.511 \sim 0.979$) (Items 1-7, Table 2), well above the item midpoint of 3, meaning that the respondents believed they had academically gained a lot from the exchange program. As shown in Table 2, because of the SA, they added diversity to their academic program such as by taking courses not offered at their home university (Item 7; $M = 4.56$), improved practical and academic skills (Item 4; $M = 4.11$), enhanced knowledge and skills in their discipline (Item 1; $M = 4.06$) and critical thinking skills (Item 6; $M = 3.94$), enhanced résumé and increased job opportunities (Item 2; $M = 3.72$), and gained valuable experience for future career (Item 3; $M = 3.61$). They also reported that the SA experience challenged them intellectually (Item 5; $M = 3.44$).

Table 2 Reported academic and linguistic gains ($N = 33$)

Item	My exchange experience:	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	enhanced my knowledge and skills in my discipline (major).	4.06	0.725
2	enhanced my résumé and increased job opportunities.	3.72	0.826
3	provided me with valuable experience for my future career.	3.61	0.979
4	improved my practical, academic skills (e.g. writing essays, giving oral reports, doing project work, etc.).	4.11	0.583
5	challenged me intellectually.	3.44	0.858
6	enhanced my critical thinking skills.	3.94	0.725
7	added diversity to my academic program (e.g. took courses not offered at the home university).	4.56	0.511
8	enhanced my proficiency in a second or foreign language.	3.83	0.786
9	enabled me to gain exposure to a second/foreign language in daily life.	4.11	0.758
10	increased my ability to communicate in the language used in the host community.	4.22	0.732

These results are generally consistent with those of the interview data. As expected, all the 13 interviewees took a variety of courses from different disciplines such as introductory psychology, human cultures, studies on homosexuality, introductory business, writing, drama, British literature, freedom and equality, UK economy, and leadership in action. Though all the interviewees took 4 courses during the semester abroad, as did most local students, the courses generally required lots of reading, writing and discussion, and the course teachers were generally more demanding than those at their home university, as reported by the interviewees. Therefore, during the process of meeting the course requirements and adapting to the academic life in the host universities, the interviewees encountered several challenges such as much reading (5/38.5%) and writing (2/15.4%), joining in classroom discussions (4/30.8%), assignments being challenging (1/7.7%), teachers being demanding (1/7.7%), and responding to the teachers promptly in class (1/7.7%). The first two to three weeks were especially difficult to them, though they soon became accustomed to the life there. Nevertheless, because most courses were "*challenging*" (Li), "*interesting*" (Ning and Min) and "*up-to-date*" (Pan), the interviewees generally liked the courses they registered and believed they had benefited considerably from the courses and "*expanded their visions*" (4/30.8%) thereafter.

Hence, when asked about the academic gains from studying abroad for one semester, the sojourners reported that the experience offered them a chance to take courses that were not offered at their home university (3/23.1%), improved their critical thinking or the ability to think and judge (6/46.2%), and writing (3/23.1%) and reading abilities (3/23.1%), changed their interests for future study (3/23.1%), expanded their interests (2/15.4%), enabled them to become (more) enthusiastic in class (1/7.7%), to read for details (1/7.7%), to know different thinking styles and what majors of other disciplines often did (1/7.7%), and to look at one thing from different aspects (1/7.7%). As Deng remarked,

the professors there are often critical, and remind us that what we take for granted is often not true. This drives me to think more and deeply. For example, I gradually realize that what we believe is good and beneficial may not be so to people of another culture.

This study-abroad experience also improved their ability to solve problems (1/7.7%), to speak out ideas promptly and to work on an unfamiliar task soon (1/7.7%), along with abilities in other aspects. For example, as reported in the post-sojourn interviews, Ning learned to write according to certain rules, especially when citing sources; Gong came to realize the difference in ways of learning between the host and home university students. As Gong recalled, "*in Amer-*

ica the primary way of learning was reading and writing, and discussion dominated classrooms, very different from that in here [home university]."

Consequently, 12 of the interviewees commented that this experience abroad would positively affect their academic life and future career, though it might not necessary empower them to become professionals. And the most important academic gain from the SA was the ability to think independently (10/76.9%). As confided by Tang,

first of all, I learned to think independently. In a multi-cultural society in America, I could access a huge amount of information and different people whose ideas and judgment could be extremely different. I found that to observe and evaluate an event from various angles is closer to the truth. After that, I gradually learned how to form my own ideas about an event, instead of simply believing what I heard.

Ning also recalled that *"I had access to a huge amount of information in America. It was important for me to think independently so that I didn't simply take whatever I read or heard. I learned to have my own judgment."* As a result, the survey respondents generally reported that this SA experience was very valuable (13/39.4%), valuable (14/42.4%) and somewhat valuable (6/18.2%) to their academic life.

Linguistic Gains

Prior to the SA, 10 (30.3%) of the survey respondents believed that their overall proficiency in the host language (namely English) was very good or good respectively, 7 (21.2%) thought it was fair, 4 (12.1%) reported it to be poor, and only 2 (6.1%) believed it to be excellent. This was fairly consistent with their self-ratings of abilities in the four skills of the language of instruction (namely English) in the host country, which ranged from 3.09 to 3.39 on the scale of 1 to 5 (see Table 3).

Table 3 Self-ratings of the abilities in the language of instruction ($N = 33$)

Item	Skill	Pre-sojourn		Post-sojourn	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
11	Listening	3.27	0.94	3.33	0.840
12	Speaking	3.12	0.82	3.67	0.767
13	Reading	3.39	0.79	3.67	0.732
14	Writing	3.09	0.84	3.35	0.857
15	Overall proficiency	3.21	0.70	3.5	0.707

Post-sojourn survey data showed that, after the sojourn, 4 students rated their overall proficiency in the language-of-instruction as excellent, 12 very

good, 12 good, and 5 just so so. Their self-ratings of abilities in the four skills of the language of instruction in the host country ranged from 3.33 to 3.67 on the scale of 1 to 5, as shown in Table 3. Clearly, the students' self-ratings of their proficiency in the language-of-instruction increased greatly after the sojourn. This is further supported by their responses to the post-sojourn survey items on linguistic gains from the exchange program (Items 8-10, Table 2). The means for the three linguistic gain items ranged from 3.83 to 4.22 ($SD = .732 \sim .786$), well above the item midpoint of 3, suggesting that the respondents believed they had greatly improved their proficiency in the language of instruction because of the SA. As reported, the SA helped increase their ability to communicate in the language used in the host community (Item 10; $M = 4.22$), gain exposure to the SL/FL in daily life (Item 9; $M = 4.11$), and enhance their proficiency in the SL/FL (Item 8; $M = 3.83$).

These findings generally conform to the self-reports of the interviewees. Prior to the SA, 4 (30.8%) of the 13 interviewees self-rated their English as pretty good and the rest rated themselves as intermediate learners of English. Although they thought that different aspects of their English needed to be improved more or less such as daily English, writing, vocabulary, listening and logical thinking, they generally believed they were able to effectively express their ideas and communicate with other people, because most of them had had contact with English-speaking people.

As reported by the interviewees, during the SA, all of them except Pan joined in one or more than one extra-curriculum activities such as entertainments and cooking contests organized by the host university or community, 7 (53.8%) volunteered in gardening, fund-raising, and reading to the old, 1 (7.7%) worked as a teaching assistant, and 1 joined the volleyball team of the host university. Involvement in these activities enabled them to (a) have (more) communication and even make friends with local and international students (9/69.2%), (b) learn how to communicate with different people (3/23.1%), and (c) become more motivated to learn (2/15.4%). Consequently, although they believed that the SA brought them some losses such as losing the chance to eat good food, the time with friends and the chance to take the courses offered at their home university, linguistically speaking, they generally achieved what they could not have achieved at their home university from the SA: (a) being in the real English-learning environment (13/100%), (b) becoming more confident to communicate with people of different backgrounds (10/76.9%), and (c) having access to real American/British English (7/53.8%).

Compared with their home university peers who did not join the exchange program, the interviewees claimed that they outweighed them in many aspects.

They claimed that they were more academic, more proficient in English, and had more widened visions, as reported in the post-sojourn interviews.

Discussion

Academic Gains

As revealed in the present study, the participants reported having greatly gained academically from the exchange program, which improved their critical thinking, and writing and reading abilities, changed their interests for future study, expanded their interests, enabled them to become (more) enthusiastic in class, to know different thinking styles, and to look at one thing from different aspects, and improved their ability to solve problems, to speak out ideas quickly and to deal with unfamiliar tasks.

The primary reason for the reported gains might lie in the difference in the curriculum and teaching style between their home and host universities. As reported by the interviewees, in their home university, each student normally had to take 7 to 10 courses per semester to fulfill BA/BS degree requirements. Because of this, they were busy transferring from one class to another, doing coursework, and preparing for course exams almost every day, leaving little time to read intensively and think critically. Coupled with the fact that the classes were usually big at their home university, few students could really participate in or contribute to classroom discussions, and in most cases the course teachers could not expect much involvement in classroom activities of the students and had to dominate the class. By contrast, the participants took 3-4 courses during the semester at the host universities, as did the local students, which often required extensive reading, discussion and writing. The course teachers often challenged students to reflect on and contribute to a better understanding of their readings via classroom discussions and individual writing. Thus it was generally fairly challenging to meet the course requirements. Moreover, the classes in the host universities were usually small, the participants either chose to or were forced to read, write and participate in classroom interactions a lot to achieve satisfactory scores in the courses. During the process, they not only became more knowledgeable about certain topics, wrote more academically in the mainstream style, but learned to read (more) intensively and faster and think (more) critically and learned how to challenge existing ideas and formulate their own. Meanwhile, because they were required to take far fewer courses, they felt less tense and happier to learn and became more attentive and enthusiastic in classrooms.

Linguistic Gains

During the SA, none of the interviewees took any English language enhancement class. Nevertheless, because the language of instruction of all the courses was English and the community language was mostly English as well, coupled with the fact that most students in all the interviewees' classes were local students or internationals who were highly proficient in English, they were not only forced to read and write lots of English but use English in all classroom activities and most extracurricular activities, just like the locals and other international students.

As a result, the participants had intense exposure to the language-of-instruction during the sojourn, contrary to their counterparts in Isabelli-García's (2010) and Pelligrino's (1998) studies. It was especially so for those who lived in student hostels on campus and/or joined extra-curricular activities organized by local or international students. Although the purely English-speaking environment made some of them (quite) anxious during the beginning two to three weeks, as they adapted themselves to the situation, they became increasingly more confident and more active participants of the community they were in. They all thus reported having improved their proficiency in English, in both formal and informal use of the language during the sojourn, as happened in numerous existing studies (Kinginger, 2008; Lafford, 2010; Lindseth, 2010; Llanes & Muñoz, 2009; Magnan & Back, 2007; Martinsen, 2008; Nagy, 2008; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011; Sasaki 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Serrano et al., 2011). And the greatest progress was reported to be in listening (8/61.5%), reading (6/46.2%), writing (5/38.5%), and speaking (4/30.8%). In general, 8 of the interviewees reported to be (very) satisfied with the progress. Han was not satisfied because she thought she could have done better, and Xiao regretted having not turned to the teachers in the language center for help more. This might be because the students of the home university tended to pursue perfection, as found in Liu (2009).

Moreover, although all the interviewees reported having made progress in the target language (namely English), there were still two who reported having the least progress in speaking. This was quite contrary to our expectation and might be related to how much contact they had with native speakers and how often they used English in their daily life.

Further examination of the data and findings revealed that most students' gains were largely attributed to their active participation in the target language community, as found in many existing studies (Dewaele & Regan, 2002; Engle & Engle, 2004; Magnan & Back, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). This was best illustrated by Xiao's experience in the present study. As recalled

by Xiao, since she joined the volleyball team of the host university, she played volleyball with other team players at least twice a week, which enabled her to communicate extensively with local and other international students on a variety of topics. She thus greatly improved her English, in both formal and informal ways. Likewise, some participants in the present study might have achieved more linguistically if they had tried to maximize their contact with the target language and make full use of their zone of proximal development (Shively, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978) by choosing to live, hang out and travel with the local or other international students instead of other Chinese most often (Jackson, 2014), as confided in the post-sojourn interviews.

To conclude, the present research revealed that the participants gained greatly from the exchange program both academically and linguistically. They became more confident when using the language-of-instruction in the host university both formally and informally. Nevertheless, since all the findings resulted from the students' own self-reports, they might not be reflective of what the participants had actually done when abroad, as discussed in Pavlenko (2007). To further validate the findings, more objective data-collection methods are required. For example, a pre- and post- proficiency test design may measure more objectively whether and to what extent students improve their proficiency in the target language during the SA.

Conclusions and Implications

The present research investigated Chinese intermediate-to-advanced EFL learners' academic and linguistic gains during one semester's study abroad; and the gains were reported to be generally satisfactory.

As discussed above, active participation in the target language community greatly helped most students in the present study gain both academically and linguistically. For this reason, as maintained by Llanes and Muñoz (2009) and Allen and Herron (2003) as well, students should be made more aware of the need to maximize their contact with the target language by making use of all opportunities available for active target language use.

Although all the participants of the present study were intermediate to advanced learners of English and more than half of the interviewees had been abroad for different durations of time prior to the sojourn, they encountered various challenges such as feeling anxious in the purely native English-speaking environment and finding it difficult to adapt to the academic life in the host universities during the first few weeks. Because they had been used to studying hard and/or effectively, as they confided themselves, they courageously tackled the difficulties to become better. Nevertheless, most students who are not so

proficient in the language of the host country and not so accustomed to working hard or effectively, and/or have never been abroad, may have more difficulties, especially during the first few weeks. This suggests some help is needed to prepare them for the life and study abroad. And the most common way is orientation, which aims to discuss and share ideas about SA students' concerns, expectations, possible challenges and strategies to handle various difficulties prior to the sojourn (Jarvis & Stakounis, 2010; Shively, 2010). As reflected by the interviewees, all the host universities organized orientations for new international students, which were quite useful in helping them become familiar with the school environment and campus facilities, and even the host cities. By contrast, no formal or official orientations and/or training sessions on the life and study abroad were held by their home university, which was considered a great shame by most interviewees. Hence, it might have been equally important to organize orientations for their home university and other institutions with a similar context to better prepare their students for the pending SA.

As more institutions of higher education and students are joining exchange programs in China, more research on study abroad is needed. Nevertheless, when interpreting the data and reporting the results, researchers have to be critical and cautious, as suggested in Pavlenko (2007), because what the participants confide may not be what they actually do. And the findings will be more insightful if future research could further explore the relationship between the characteristics of SA students' environment (e.g., extra-curriculum activities, type of accommodation, etc.) and their academic and linguistic gains.

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