



Linguistic and sociocultural strategies in a transnational context: Chinese-speaking sojourners' multidimensional adjustments in the UK

Xinyang Lu, Vanessa Mar-Molinero, Vicky Wright & Ying Zheng

To cite this article: Xinyang Lu, Vanessa Mar-Molinero, Vicky Wright & Ying Zheng (04 Jan 2026): Linguistic and sociocultural strategies in a transnational context: Chinese-speaking sojourners' multidimensional adjustments in the UK, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2025.2604484

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2025.2604484>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Jan 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1048



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Linguistic and sociocultural strategies in a transnational context: Chinese-speaking sojourners' multidimensional adjustments in the UK

Xinyang Lu ^a, Vanessa Mar-Molinero^b, Vicky Wright^a and Ying Zheng ^a

^aDepartment of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; ^bAcademic Centre for International Students, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT

This article reports on multiple case studies exploring how five Chinese-speaking sojourners demonstrate transcultural abilities and awareness by mediating their linguistic and sociocultural strategies while interacting with non-Chinese-speaking social networks at a UK university. Data are gathered through five participant observations conducted across three social settings, followed by five retrospective interviews. This study expands research on language learning strategies by investigating strategic practices associated with transcultural abilities in authentic second-language social contexts. These strategies can be incorporated into educational programmes to enhance sojourners' transversal competences during their mobility journey in an increasingly transnational world.

本研究采用多案例方法，考察五名华语留学生在英国与非华语者互动中如何调适语言与社会文化策略，来展现其跨文化能力。数据来源五次情境观摩与回溯访谈。此研究拓展语言学习策略视角，并为跨文化教育培训提供启示。

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2024
Accepted 9 December 2025

KEYWORDS

Intercultural communication; language learning strategies; second language acquisition; study abroad; transcultural competence and awareness

Introduction

The UK has consistently remained the second most popular study destination for international students, behind only the US (UNESCO, 2024). The steady growth of international students is more remarkable alongside the UK's departure from the European Union and the COVID-19 pandemic (HESA, 2024). Meanwhile, Chinese-speaking sojourners currently represent a large proportion of international students in UK universities (HESA, 2024). It has been reported (Lu et al., 2022; Page, 2019) that Chinese-speaking sojourners, for the most part, have a low level of social integration into international communities in the UK, and they tend to stay with their co-nationals. This lack of integration has given rise to the notion of the 'Chinese phantom' (Urban Dictionary, 2018). In this stereotype, Chinese-speaking sojourners are perceived as a hidden group by other international students.

However, recent research findings have shown that some resourceful Chinese sojourners actively and autonomously employ various strategies to integrate into non-Chinese-speaking networks for both linguistic and non-linguistic encounters (Lu et al., 2022). For example, the newly observed 'concealing identity strategy' employed by some autonomous Chinese sojourners to hide their

CONTACT Xinyang Lu  luxinyang319@hotmail.com

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

‘atheist identity’, which they perceive as a barrier in religious social settings in the UK, mitigates affective challenges so as to open access to both linguistic and non-linguistic affordances within these specific contexts (Lu et al., 2022). Therefore, these resourceful Chinese sojourners’ linguistic and sociocultural experiences challenge the stereotype of the ‘Chinese phantom’. The research conducted by Zheng (2017) also explores emotion management strategies constructed by Chinese international students to preserve their psychological well-being during intercultural adjustment at a UK university. Another recent research conducted by Zhang (2023) further proposes that silence can be employed as an interactional strategy that is constructive to the process of conversations in multicultural group work.

Nevertheless, there is still insufficient research investigating successful Chinese-speaking sojourners who exhibit transcultural abilities and awareness by employing a set of strategies in L2 social settings in the UK. To address this gap, the present study investigates how five Chinese-speaking sojourners mediate linguistic and sociocultural strategies while interacting with non-Chinese speakers at a UK university. The study draws on five participant observations across three social settings, followed by five retrospective interviews. The findings predominantly identify a set of newly emerging tactics employed by these five sojourners, which are not recorded in the existing taxonomies of Language Learning Strategies proposed by Oxford (2013). The findings show that these successful sojourners not only use such new tactics to employ metacognitive and cognitive strategies during socialisation for language learning. More importantly, their transcultural abilities and awareness are manifested through exercising agency to employ meta-sociocultural interactive (Meta-SI) and sociocultural interactive (SI) strategies to manage sociocultural contexts and to negotiate identity in specific social settings.

Therefore, taken together, these five case studies offer a broader perspective on learners’ strategic efforts not only in self-regulation cognitive abilities (Plonsky, 2011; Redmer, 2022) but also in socialisation and transcultural abilities in real L2 social settings from a socially oriented perspective in the field of Language Learning Strategies (LLS) research. Moreover, the findings suggest that these strategies can be incorporated into educational programmes to introduce sojourners to linguistic and sociocultural strategies through formal and non-formal routes. Thus, this can enhance their transversal competences in dealing with a whole package of linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural issues during their mobility journey.

Literature review

This study mainly builds upon ecology theory (Damşa et al., 2019; Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020) to investigate how Chinese-speaking sojourners employ a set of linguistic and sociocultural strategies to interact with non-Chinese speakers while they are nested in a range of dynamic, interactive and complex eco-systems. To achieve this, this study mainly investigates these sojourners’ capacity to recognise, perceive, and act upon affordances in the eco-system available and relevant to themselves (Palfreyman, 2011, 2014). This study incorporates the elements of affordance, agency, and LLS to make sense of how these features are socially mediated during the process of the dynamic and complex interplay among individual, situational, cultural, and societal ecological features in the holistic eco-system (Damşa et al., 2019; Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008).

Ecology theory

The ‘social turn’ (Block, 2003) in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) prompts a significant shift in research towards interaction and social dimensions of second language learning and use (Lantolf & Thorne, 2008), and employs various socially oriented frameworks in language learning theory (Block, 2003; Coupland et al., 2014). The socially oriented perspectives emphasise the social, cultural, and historical contexts of language learning (e.g. van Lier, 2007, 2008).

As one of the predominant socially oriented perspectives, ecology theory concerns individuals and study abroad contexts together as an interactive, dynamic and complex eco-system (Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020) rather than a categorical label and static entity as recognised by the socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1980). Ecology theory underpins investigations into participants' language acquisition process during study abroad as an emergent phenomenon that evolves during the complex co-constructed interactions between the individuals and the natural surroundings in their nested social eco-systems (Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020).

Ecology theory recognises that the social context in which language learning is embedded constitutes a dynamic, complex eco-social system comprised of interacting components, both human and non-human (Damşa et al., 2019; Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020). This means that individual learners are not considered to be within a certain context; they are themselves part of the eco-social system (Damşa et al., 2019; Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020). From an ecological point of view, individuals are one of many agentive components in complex and dynamic eco-social systems and discourses, and they are fluid, adaptable beings embedded within their environments (Damşa et al., 2019; Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020)

Affordance

The ecological perspective offers a new metaphor for understanding language learning, particularly beyond the formal classroom: affordance (Menezes, 2011; van Lier, 2004). van Lier (2004, pp. 91–92) proposes that affordance implies 'what is the available opportunity or possibility for individuals to do something with'. It means that affordance is *an action in potential*, and it emerges when individuals interact with physical and social environments. It can be understood that affordance emerges when individuals respond to possibilities for interaction, openness, and constraint, readjusting and adapting to the changing conditions in a social eco-system (Menezes, 2011). Following this, it is important to consider the key constructs in the definition of affordance: complementarity, opportunity, possibility, interaction and relations (van Lier, 2004).

The crucial point, as Gibson (2013) suggests, is that affordance is dependent upon individuals' perceptions and actions. An affordance can only be an affordance when it is perceived as an opportunity for action. Here, perception is identified not as a mental capacity but as an ecological phenomenon caused by individuals' interactions with their eco-systems (Gibson, 2013; Menezes, 2011). This point of view again supports the argument that affordance is not the property of the environment (Ellis, 2019), because 'different individuals have different perceptions of the world, also the interactions between individuals and the environment emerge from different social practices based on different individuals' (Ellis, 2019). Thus, in the area of language learning, different individuals can perceive and act upon different possibilities and opportunities for their personal language learning purposes, even when they are situated in the same learning context (Menezes, 2011).

Therefore, affordance underpins the investigation into what types of linguistic and non-linguistic encounters are perceived and utilised by participants within different L2 social settings through their enactment of transcultural strategic efforts. This concept provides an insightful lens for examining the dynamic and complex interplay between participants and the social settings they engage in.

Agency

Benson (2013) and Mercer (2011) argue that to make the most of such affordances in a range of contexts, it is necessary for a learner to feel a sense of agency in such contexts. This also echoes the point that, from an ecological point of view, individuals are one of many agentive components in complex and dynamic eco-social systems and discourses, and they are dynamic beings (Ellis, 2019). Given this, agency is always associated with the affordances in the context and is inseparable from them (Ellis, 2019). Lantolf & Thorne (2006, p. 238) propose that 'agency is socio-culturally

mediated and dialectically enacted. In other words, within a given time and space, there are constraints and affordances that make certain actions probable, others possible, and yet others impossible.'

Meanwhile, agency may emerge in different forms to cope with unknown situations, which is multidimensional (Larsen-Freeman, 2019). In some cases, the mediated agency could be external and observable (visible to an observer) (e.g. social, behavioural). In other cases, the mediated agency may be unobservable (invisible to an observer) (e.g. no behavioural action, cognitive, or affective) (Tweed & Reinders, 2023). For instance, van Lier (2008, p. 172) notes that agency does not necessarily entail visible actions, as individuals could express their agency by deliberately not acting.

More importantly, the ongoing interplay between contexts and agency also underpins the application of LLS for individuals to create new affordances in the environment and to adapt to changing situations by seeking out new affordances or utilising new approaches while employing them (Palfreyman, 2011, 2014). Therefore, agency facilitates exploring the observable or unobservable actions taken by participants to employ a set of LLS to have affordances within their involved environment. This perspective deepens understanding of how agency is both enabled and constrained in different settings and how participants' actions are deeply intertwined with their nested contexts.

Language learning strategies

From an ecological perspective, LLS can be seen as both a cognitive and metacognitive process, as well as an action seeking alternative opportunities (Palfreyman, 2014). This study employs LLS taxonomies proposed by Oxford (2013) to investigate not only cognitive and metacognitive strategies that participants utilise to interact with target language speakers but also sociocultural interactive strategies to open up access and alternative affordances within power structures and cultural alternatives in the eco-systems (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Oxford, 2003, p. 79, 2013).

As defined by Oxford (2013, pp. 43–88), metacognitive strategies refer to managing cognitive aspects of L2 learning; cognitive strategies refer to the mental process or faculty of knowing, including awareness, perception, reasoning and certain kinds of judgements; meta-affective strategies refer to managing affective needs, such as emotions, beliefs, attitudes and motivations; affective strategies refer to helping learners directly optimise their emotions, beliefs, attitudes and motivation for the purpose of L2 learning; meta sociocultural interactive (Meta-SI) strategies refer to metaknowledge that is toward the cultural and communication dimension of L2 learning, and sociocultural interactive (SI) strategies refer to strategies for sociocultural contexts and communication, which facilitate communication and deep understanding of the sociocultural context and one's role in it.

This study applies Oxford (2013)'s LLS taxonomies to a set of real L2 social settings from a socially oriented perspective, which offers a broader perspective on learners' strategic efforts not only in self-regulation cognitive abilities but also in transcultural adaptability and awareness within transnational eco-systems. This study also contributes to the current research on sojourners studying abroad as 'whole people with whole lives' (Coleman, 2013). Much of the research on language acquisition during study abroad has been confined to formal classrooms, with limited attention to learning in real social settings (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011). The use of the target language during study abroad outside the formal classroom is 'radically under-theorised' (Benson, 2011; Sundqvist, 2011). Therefore, this study is conducted in a range of communicative social settings beyond the constraints of the formal classroom. This approach allows the study to reveal patterns of language learning and sociocultural experience across diverse contexts, illustrating why, where, what, and how such social and linguistic practices occur during study abroad.

Following this, the research question is formulated:

RQ: What techniques and strategies do Chinese-speaking sojourners employ to exhibit their transcultural abilities and awareness while interacting with non-Chinese-speaking networks in various social settings in the UK?

Methods

The study

These multiple case studies track how five Chinese-speaking sojourners exhibit transcultural abilities and awareness by mediating their linguistic and sociocultural strategies while interacting with non-Chinese speakers at a UK university. Data are gathered through five participant observations in three different social settings, followed by five retrospective interviews.

Participants

This study targets Chinese-speaking sojourners at a UK university at different degree levels and faculties, whose first languages are Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Taiwanese, or a sub-dialect of these languages or combinations thereof. Meanwhile, this study mainly includes the Chinese-speaking sojourners who have not permanently immigrated to the UK or any other countries outside China, thus removing the influence of immigration on these sojourners' expectations and motivations toward their socialisation and integration into the UK's local and other international communities.

Participants' background information is kept confidential to protect their privacy. For this reason, their real names are not reported, and pseudonyms are used instead. All the participants consent to participate in the study, and no incentive is offered. Appendix A provides profiles of the five participants, detailing their gender, age, birthplace, first language, degree level, faculty affiliation, accommodation type, and participant observation settings, while also recording each individual's event attendance duration as a key factor.

Research methods

This study adopts a qualitative research method through five participant observations in three different social settings at a UK university. According to Dörnyei (2007) and Starfield (2015), the employment of qualitative approaches in Applied Linguistics leads to the development of in-depth analysis of language learning in the specific social and cultural contexts within which they are taking place. This echoes the ecological perspective followed by this study, which situates individuals and language learning in the specific eco-system and investigates the dynamic interactions among individuals, language learning, and features of the eco-system. Participant observation provides the possibility of 'surprise', which is the emergence of knowledge that is not predetermined by the original research paradigm (Dörnyei, 2007; Starfield, 2015). This method enables the researcher to identify underlying patterns and regularities in participants' social behaviours, attitudes, and interactions with non-Chinese speakers across different social settings (Dörnyei, 2007; Starfield, 2015). Observations also allow unanticipated themes to emerge beyond the initial research aims (Dörnyei, 2007; Starfield, 2015), enriching the qualitative data corpus.

Among the three social settings, the researcher carries out non-intrusive observation (pure observation from a distance without engaging in participants' activities) in the Language Exchange and Football events, but intrusive observation (observation involving engagement in the activities with participants) in the Drink Night event, reflecting the nature of each setting. The rationale for conducting non-intrusive observation in the Language Exchange and Football events is that it is easy for the researcher to 'hide' in the crowd while observing from a distance in a big lounge hall and on a football pitch. However, the Drink Night event is a private friends' gathering and is held in one of the participants' accommodations. Therefore, it is hard for the researcher to 'hide', as non-intrusive observation would make the researcher look out of place and potentially make all attendees feel uncomfortable, feeling they are being 'supervised'. Therefore, the researcher comes to this event as the participants' 'tag-along friend'. The researcher behaves as a non-active

participant, keeping a low profile to minimise their influence on the interactions of attendees. This study further conducts five follow-up retrospective interviews to explore participants' feelings and explanations of their actions captured by the participant observations. This helps ensure that the researcher's interpretation of the participants' behaviours aligns with their explanations. These interviews also explore the unobservable actions (e.g. emotions, feelings) that participant observations cannot capture alone.

Research sites

This study is conducted at a university in southeast England, which is a member of the UK's Russell Group (24 leading universities). The Chinese student community constitutes the majority of the international student population at this UK university. The five participant observations are carried out in the three social settings: the Language Exchange Event, the Football Event and the Drink Night.

Data analysis

This study employs qualitative content analysis to analyse the qualitative data collected through participant observations and follow-up retrospective interviews. The content analysis includes the steps of transcribing the data, pre-coding and coding, developing ideas for presenting the data, interpreting the data, and generating conclusions (Dörnyei, 2007; Phakiti & Paltridge, 2015). The researcher adopts computer-assisted transcription software, Transcribe (Speech to Text), to transcribe audio-recorded observation field notes and follow-up interviews. The qualitative data are then processed and analysed using NVivo 12® through two rounds of coding. Pre-coding involves reading and re-reading the transcripts, reflecting on them and noting thoughts and memos. This pre-coding reflection informs the researcher's understanding of the data and guides the coding process. During the main coding, the researcher reads and re-reads the transcripts, analyses and re-analyses the data to identify the key codes, and also notes the emerging themes.

Additionally, this study adopts 'vignettes' to present narratives of selected clips of social and language interactions retrieved from the interviews and participant observations, with a particular focus on participants' strategies and actions. Vignettes are story-like short narratives that provide focused descriptions of events or participant experiences viewed as typical or representative (Creese et al., 2016; Dörnyei, 2007). Therefore, this study employs five vignettes in the following section to present the main findings regarding LLS drawn from participant observations and retrospective interviews.

Findings: language learning strategies

The following section presents five vignettes drawn from participant observations and interviews. Each vignette focuses on one participant's key strategies and actions in specific social settings, showing how they deal with linguistic, affective, and sociocultural challenges. Together, these vignettes illustrate the range of strategic efforts and transcultural abilities that emerged across the participants, and a comparison of their strategies is presented at the end of this section.

Vignette 1 – Claire in the language exchange event

The Language Exchange Event was a relaxed, informal social occasion. Attendees normally came to have a drink and practise different languages with people from different cultural backgrounds. National flags functioned as visible cues to help attendees locate tables for their target languages.

Claire arrived 30–40 minutes after the event began and joined a table marked with a French flag, as her primary goal was to practise French. Although her French proficiency was limited, she aimed

to learn basic vocabulary through real interaction with French speakers. As she explained in the interview: ‘I feel I have got quite a lot of opportunities to speak English in the UK, but still limited chances to speak French here. The Language Exchange is a good opportunity because it is about exchanging different languages and is designed for multilingual practice.’

During the event, it was observed that Claire actively engaged with non-Chinese speakers while having drinks during conversations. Her exchanges often involved spontaneous code-switching among three languages. As she mentioned: ‘I mainly want to learn some basic French vocabulary here, but most of the time we still use English to communicate and to explain French, as my French is not strong enough to lead the whole conversation, and English is the lingua franca. Meanwhile, sometimes, I also need to trade my first language (Mandarin Chinese) for access to a table if others are interested in Chinese language or culture. I think my language use here is 60% English, 10% French, and 30% Mandarin Chinese.’ Therefore, Claire’s engagement at the event primarily served her French learning goals, but her limited proficiency necessitated English as the lingua franca for the main conversations, while the dynamics of the exchange demanded flexibility when interlocutors showed interest in Mandarin Chinese. For example:

A French girl asked Claire: ‘I remember some Chinese people told me ‘*Jingjing*’ could be a girl’s name, but also could mean something else?’

Claire replied: ‘*Jingjing*? oh, you mean “静静”. Yes, it is funny; it could be a girl’s nickname, as Chinese people like to use double characters as their nickname. But “静静” (*Jingjing*) can also mean “I want some personal time.” So next time, if you do not want to be bothered by others, you can say “I want some *Jingjing*”.’

This vignette captures more examples of English-Mandarin switching than French-English, as Claire’s limited French restricted extended exchanges. Claire also mentioned that an Italian boy who joined later, but she found it difficult to understand his accent, so she smiled or sipped a drink to pretend she understood what he was saying.

This vignette shows Claire ‘orchestrated her attendance timing’ (a newly identified tactic in Meta-SI strategies) by deliberately arriving after the event began, noting that timing influenced how comfortably she could join a table. As Claire mentioned in the interview: ‘Thirty minutes in is ideal as it is easier to spot an empty chair or see some people I am familiar with.’ Meanwhile, she joined the ‘French table’ after noticing the French flag and an empty chair: ‘I always check whether there are any empty chairs, because it indicates potential opportunities for me to join a table.’ It shows that Claire not only ‘paid attention to contexts’ (Meta-SI strategies) but also ‘orchestrated the way of joining a table’ (a newly observed tactic in Meta-SI strategies). The vignette also shows Claire was adept at ‘organising for contexts’ (Meta-SI strategies). She organised different settings for different language practice. She felt she already had enough opportunities for English practice in the UK, so she chose Language Exchange specifically for French, given its multilingual environment. Claire’s limited French proficiency required her reliance on English for the main conversations, while the French girl’s interest in Mandarin prompted additional code-switching (communication strategies). However, Claire’s primary focus remained on acquiring basic French vocabulary through these interactions. Claire also used drinks as an affective resource to relax and hide awkward feelings (a newly observed tactic in Meta-affect strategies). As she admitted: ‘Drinking helps me relax and feel less nervous, and it can hide awkward feelings when I do not understand others.’ For example, she smiled or sipped her drink to ‘pretend to understand’ (SI strategies) when an Italian boy spoke with a heavy accent, temporarily managing the knowledge gap.

Claire’s experience in the Language Exchange Event shows how she exercised her agency to organise her attendance time, make use of her multilingual resources, and manage her emotions to fit into the event. Her case represents one pattern of strategic engagement among the participants in this study. The other two participants’ strategies in this same social setting, Wendy and Yolanda, are presented in Vignettes 2 and 3 below.

Vignette 2 – Wendy in the language exchange event

During the observation, it was noted that Wendy frequently pointed towards the TV screen during conversations with non-Chinese speakers. She also regularly looked at flyers and posters together with other attendees during conversations. As explained by Wendy, at first, she found it difficult to identify suitable topics and to sustain conversation with non-Chinese speakers. During her first few visits to the Language Exchange Event, she often ran out of things to say. Over time, however, she began using her surroundings, such as the TV, flyers and posters on the table, as conversational resources to help her generate new topics. As Wendy mentioned: ‘I gradually found different ways to create new conversation topics with non-Chinese speakers. For example, I always glance at the TV screen beside me when I do not know what to talk about. If the TV is showing BBC News about wars, then I can talk about wars with them. Flyers and posters are also good affordances. I always look at new events introduced on flyers, and then I can talk about the events and even hang out with them.’

In addition to drawing on her surrounding affordances, Wendy also observed and imitated how non-Chinese speakers created conversation topics and sustained interaction. She mentioned: ‘I noticed that non-Chinese speakers are very good at “asking back”, they always “throw the ball back” to continue the conversation. I feel that is a good strategy.’ Wendy also made conscious efforts to reflect on her past interactions. After each event, she thought about the topics she had discussed with others the previous weeks and reused some of them when talking with new groups of people. She reported that she often evaluated both her socialisation strategies and the quality of her social networks, comparing them to those of non-Chinese speakers. She stated: ‘When I went home after Language Exchange, I always thought that I was still not relaxed or lively enough when talking to others compared with non-Chinese speakers. I felt I was still too dull. I hope I can improve next time. I also felt that I stayed with familiar social networks too much. I should step out of my comfort zone and expand more new social networks each time at Language Exchange.’ However, Wendy also encountered situations that made her uncomfortable. She reported feeling uneasy when she realised that some non-Chinese-speaking male attendees seemed to come to the Language Exchange not for language practice or socialisation, but for dating. She said: ‘I feel quite uncomfortable that some non-Chinese speaking boys seem to flirt with girls in the Language Exchange. They did not come for language or normal socialisation. I try to understand social or dating customs in Western countries, but even so, I still cannot accept that.’

Overall, this vignette illustrates that Wendy was skilled in ‘orchestrating strategy use for creating new conversation topics’ (a newly identified tactic in Meta-SI strategies). She ‘obtained and used the surrounding affordances as resources’, autonomously drawing on TV screens and flyers to initiate and sustain conversations. Wendy also ‘paid attention to how non-Chinese speakers created new topics’ (Meta-SI strategies) and ‘imitated their techniques of ‘asking back’ to continue conversations (a newly observed tactic in SI strategies). In addition, Wendy brainstormed previous conversations (cognitive strategies), evaluated her affect (meta-affective strategies) and assessed her social networks (a newly observed tactic in Meta-SI strategies). By observing and imitating non-Chinese speakers’ facial expressions and body language (Meta-SI strategies), Wendy sought to appear as relaxed and lively as they were (SI strategies). Her discomfort about the ‘dating issue’ further shows that she paid attention to affect (Meta-affective strategies) and explored whether such behaviour reflected Western social and dating customs (a newly observed SI tactic).

Vignette 3 – Yolanda in the language exchange event

During the Language Exchange Event, Yolanda continually adjusted her target language goals in response to the situation. She explained: ‘I have to keep changing my target language. I planned to learn Korean at first because I noticed too many Chinese-speaking students swarming to learn

English, and I tried to avoid them. However, I rarely see Korean people here. It seems this is not a very popular language here, so I have to practise English again. I feel disappointed about it, and I do not feel I will come again. I try to set low expectations now when I come here with my coursemates. I try to think positively about meeting new people here and practising English. But sometimes I feel a bit trapped by my coursemates, and I feel they rely on me too much, making it hard for me to extend new social networks here.'

This vignette shows Yolanda 'paid attention to contexts' (Meta-SI strategies) and planned her target language use accordingly, initially choosing Korean while intentionally avoiding large groups of Chinese speakers. However, she later had to orchestrate different target languages (a newly identified tactic in Meta-SI strategies) because of the limited number of Korean attendees and the language's low popularity at the event.

As a result, Yolanda adopted the strategy of 'setting low expectations' (affective strategies) to maintain positive emotions, yet she still 'felt somewhat disappointed' (Meta-affect) when the event did not meet her original language learning goals. She also felt trapped by her existing social networks (Meta-affective), which limited her ability to develop new ones. Ultimately, after evaluating the event (Meta-SI strategies), she decided not to attend future sessions.

Together, the three vignettes above highlight participants' experiences in the Language Exchange Event, where multilingual interactions were central to their strategic engagement. The next vignette moves to a different social setting, the Football Event, to show how strategies were employed in a more activity-based and teamwork-oriented context.

Vignette 4 – Zack in the football event

During the Football Event, Zack demonstrated strong engagement and enthusiasm. He actively communicated with teammates during warm-ups and consistently used football-related terms and calls throughout the game. As Zack explained in the interview, he intentionally learned these expressions during matches to apply them immediately in real-game situations: 'I prefer picking up jargon and vocal cues during games because the real-life context helps me remember and use them better. Sometimes I ask teammates directly, but usually, I can guess meanings from the situation and their body language.' Zack reported feeling increasingly confident and socially outgoing after interacting with non-Chinese speakers in this environment. He noted: 'Football requires teamwork, so I push myself to be more outgoing than others to fit in.' Interestingly, despite his active participation during games, Zack consistently left immediately afterwards, choosing to avoid post-match socialising. He said: 'I know they go to pubs and do cosplay to dress as female characters, which I saw on Facebook. I respect that it might be a Western custom, but it's not for me. So I skip those gatherings.'

This vignette shows Zack employed the 'interact with learning and communication' tactic (SI strategies) to acquire new football jargon through direct communication with teammates while immediately applying these terms in authentic game contexts. He also 'paid attention to contexts, communication' (Meta-SI strategies), noticing and understanding new football terms as they emerged during play. Zack frequently employed the 'inferring' tactic (cognitive strategies) to determine meanings from situational context and body language, though he occasionally relied on direct appeals for help (SI strategies) when uncertain about meanings.

Moreover, Zack 'paid attention to contexts, communication' (Meta-SI strategies) in recognising football's cooperative nature, leading him to 'imitate team-oriented behaviours' (SI strategies) by becoming more outgoing to better adapt to team dynamics. It is further interesting to find Zack 'explored sociocultural meanings of cosplay' (a newly identified tactic in SI strategies) to understand his teammates' social habits, yet his personal discomfort led him to employ the 'orchestrate identity strategy' (a newly identified tactic in Meta-SI strategies) to show *full participation* during the football game while deliberately showing *non-participation* in activities that conflicted with his values to maintain his core identity.

While Zack's vignette focuses on an open and activity-based social environment, the next vignette turns to a more private and intimate setting, the Drink Night, where participants' strategies emerged in a relaxed, informal atmosphere among close friends.

Vignette 5 – Louis in the drink night

Louis organised this Drink Night as a private gathering with close friends in his accommodation. The atmosphere during the event was casual and easy-going, with everyone chatting freely. However, it was observed that Louis became rather quiet when the conversation turned to travel experiences. As he explained in the interview: 'I feel a bit awkward and nervous when the others were talking about travelling. I am not very good at geography. I am not familiar with many countries, so when they mentioned Vienna, I wasn't sure whether it was in Austria. I don't even know how many provinces China has, so I could only stay quiet.'

During the event, Louis mentioned the term 'woman in labour', which he had learned from a YouTube video. He explained: 'I remembered a YouTube video I watched. They used the term "woman in labour." The videos and pictures helped me remember it. I can use it when others talk about their friends who have just had a baby. I prefer to use the terms I learn in real conversations.'

It is further interesting to find that Louis and another Chinese attendee used different approaches to learn new words from non-Chinese speakers. For example:

British boy: 'I feel Vienna is quite a posh city.'

Louis: 'Posh?' (slightly questioning tone)

Other Chinese boy: 'What do you mean by posh?'

British boy: 'Wealthy, high-class.'

Louis later explained in his interview: 'I was also thinking about synonyms to understand "posh", such as "luxurious" or "fancy"'

This vignette shows that Louis 'paid attention to affect' (Meta-affective strategies) when encountering unknown topics, as he felt awkward and nervous about his limited knowledge. Interestingly, he used 'silence' as a strategy (a newly observed tactic in SI strategies) to manage his affect and maintain participation despite gaps in knowledge. Meanwhile, Louis 'used visual sense' to 'understand and remember words' (cognitive strategies), activated and retrieved the term 'woman in labour' (cognitive strategies) and used it in later interactions with non-Chinese speakers. He mentally visualised the picture and video of the woman giving birth when he wanted to remember and retrieve this term. He mentally visualised scenes from the video to recall the term and apply it in real contexts. During conversations about 'posh', Louis again demonstrated attention to communication (Meta-SI strategies), showing awareness of new vocabulary as it appeared. However, it was interesting to find that he and the other Chinese boy adopted different strategies while interacting to learn and communicate (SI strategies). The other Chinese attendee asked directly for help, while Louis adopted a subtler approach by repeating the word 'posh' with a questioning tone to signal uncertainty indirectly. He also conceptualised broadly by linking synonyms such as 'luxurious' and 'fancy' to build understanding (cognitive strategies). Louis's case highlights how he combined meta-affective, cognitive, and sociocultural interactive strategies to manage affective discomfort, compensate for knowledge gaps, and transform visual and social cues into learning opportunities.

Taken together, the five participants show both shared and distinctive ways of using a set of strategies across different social settings. In the Language Exchange event, Claire's experience resonates with the other two participants, Wendy and Yolanda, who similarly adjusted their arrival times and traded Mandarin Chinese for table access. This creates a recurring pattern in which their L1 became a transactional resource. Yolanda, for example, further echoes Claire's code-switching experience

while learning Korean at the event. With limited Korean proficiency, Yolanda primarily used English as the lingua franca for main conversations but switched to Mandarin when teaching Chinese. Collectively, these practices demonstrate how participants strategically employ their multilingual abilities to reach their learning goals. At the same time, the other two participants, Zack in the Football Event and Louis in the Drink Night, show how their strategies are closely linked to the specific social situations. Zack learned and used new football jargon through direct communication with teammates, while Louis relied on visual memory and silence to handle unknown topics and manage his affect. Altogether, these cases show that all participants employ different combinations of cognitive, affective, and sociocultural strategies to respond to changing contexts and to create or make use of opportunities for communication and learning. This comparison also highlights how personal factors and situational features work together to shape their transcultural engagement, which is discussed in the next section.

Discussion

Techniques and strategies for transcultural engagement in dynamic eco-social systems

Building on the patterns identified across the five vignettes, the following discussion interprets the findings through the lens of ecology theory, learner agency, and language and sociocultural strategies, to explore the techniques and strategies that support participants' transcultural engagement within dynamic eco-social systems.

Exercise of agency

The five participants exhibit a high degree of agency through both observable and unobservable actions (Benson & Huang, 2013; Tweed & Reinders, 2023) in response to changing circumstances in the three social settings. They express social and behavioural agency through observable actions: most participants are proactive and outgoing, initiating conversations during socialisation rather than waiting passively or staying quiet. It is also interesting to find that some participants express agency differently by creating affordances for themselves and others, even if they do not behave as proactively as others. For example, Louis organised the Drink Night event. Meanwhile, all participants in the Language Exchange Event adjust and reconstruct their social habits/manners to fit better within the context, such as adjusting their attendance timing, conversation topics, and seating. Some also utilise surrounding affordances (e.g. drinks, TV, flyers and posters) offered by this event to facilitate conversation topics with non-Chinese speakers.

On the other hand, the five participants also express cognitive and affective agency through unobservable actions. For instance, many adjust their emotions to better fit into the specific events. In the Language Exchange and Football events, the participants push themselves to be less nervous, more outgoing, and more confident. These affective strategies expand existing knowledge of affective intercultural adjustment by unveiling international students' dynamic and multidimensional adjustment processes during their mobility journey (e.g. Zheng, 2017). Therefore, all of these show that the participants mediate and reconstruct their agency through both observable and unobservable actions to fit into diverse social contexts, demonstrating a sense of agency toward various affordances as active human agents. This echoes the ecological perspective that individuals are agentive components in complex and dynamic eco-social systems and discourses (Damşa et al., 2019; Isabelli-Garcia & Isabelli, 2020). This further expands the argument that agency manifests in multiple dimensions, including social, behavioural, affective, and cognitive, through both visible and invisible actions. Meanwhile, some participants also express agency by deliberately not acting or remaining silent to manage awkward or nervous feelings. For example, Louis's strategic use of silence to manage discomfort when facing unfamiliar topics extends Zhang (2023)'s research findings by showing that silence functions not only as an interactional strategy, but also as an affective and psychological one in authentic multicultural contexts.

Furthermore, following Gao (2007, 2010), agency is a precondition for individuals to make choices about LLS. Learners choose particular strategies in response to specific contextual realities, and individual differences in goals and capacities lead to distinct strategic actions (agency) even within similar contexts.

Language and sociocultural strategies

The findings show that the five participants employ not only meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies for linguistic encounters, but also extensive use of Meta-SI and SI Strategies. These strategic efforts facilitate exposure to non-Chinese speakers and assist in navigating sociocultural contexts and negotiating identity within different social settings. The vignettes further demonstrate that participants rarely use a single strategy in isolation; instead, they employ a set of strategies continuously to address linguistic, affective, and sociocultural challenges simultaneously during their socialisation.

The findings also reveal how extrinsic situational factors in different eco-social systems influence participants' strategy use. For example, meta-affective and affective strategies are shaped by factors such as the attitudes of interactants, the atmosphere of events, and existing social networks. Participants also draw on situational resources: drinks, Chinese-speaking friends, and authentic English-speaking environments, to regulate or encourage affect. It is further observed that situational factors shape participants' utilisation of 'orchestrating strategy use for contexts, communication, and culture' (Meta-SI strategies), as they adapt their identity performances, ways of joining a table, target languages, and personalities (e.g. being more outgoing and confident) according to the context. Similarly, SI strategies, such as preparing conversation topics, imitating non-Chinese speakers' social behaviours, and exploring sociocultural meanings of unfamiliar habits, are also contextually influenced.

It is important to note that intrinsic personal factors and extrinsic situational factors often interact in shaping strategy use. For instance, different social habits of non-Chinese speakers, such as cosplay or dating norms (situational), combined with participants' personal values and core identity (intrinsic), can lead to the utilisation of 'orchestrate identity strategies for different parts of the event' (Meta-SI strategies). Likewise, unfamiliar conversation topics and affective discomfort jointly lead to strategic silence to 'overcome knowledge gaps' (SI strategies). These examples suggest that LLS represent not only cognitive and metacognitive processes, but also agentive actions to seek alternative opportunities and exhibit transcultural competence in navigating sociocultural and identity challenges in transnational contexts.

The participants' Meta-SI and SI strategic efforts demonstrate their ability to subvert the imposing learning context (eco-system) to 'open up or create access and alternative affordances within power structures and cultural alternatives for learners' (Oxford, 2003, p. 79, 2013). The dynamic interactions between extrinsic and intrinsic factors echo the ecological perspective, which conceptualises second language acquisition (SLA) as part of a holistic eco-system shaped by individual, situational, cultural, and societal interrelations (Damşa et al., 2019; Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008). From this standpoint, ecology theory recognises individuals and social systems as dynamic and interdependent rather than static entities, differing from sociocultural theory's more structural focus (Vygotsky, 1980).

Meanwhile, the sociocultural and identity issues addressed through Meta-SI and SI strategies also support Kramsch C. (2006, p. 251)'s point that ecology theory acknowledges communication as 'not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings' (Badwan & Simpson, 2022). This expands Jackson (2018, 2019), Howard (2019) and Badwan and Simpson (2022)'s points that effective intercultural communication during study abroad depends not only on linguistic competence but also on socially grounded interactional competence. As sojourners studying abroad could often face both linguistic and sociocultural challenges (Scott et al., 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), such awareness and adaptability are essential.

Overall, the results indicate that the participants employ interrelated linguistic, sociocultural, and affective strategies to manage complex issues in multicultural settings while studying abroad. Collectively, these strategies suggest that participants have developed linguistic awareness, intercultural communication awareness and competence to manage the complexity and variability of communicative practices, in which negotiation and adaptation are central (Baker, 2016).

Conclusion

This study qualitatively explores how Chinese-speaking sojourners employ linguistic and sociocultural strategies to integrate into diverse social settings in the UK. Their transcultural abilities and awareness are manifested through the exercise of a high degree of agency as they navigate and adapt to real L2 social settings within a transnational world. By engaging with varied social networks, the participants encounter not only linguistic challenges but also cultural, social, and emotional dimensions of interaction. When sojourners enact their agency to act upon the affordances offered by these settings, they access valuable opportunities for learning and personal growth while studying abroad.

In line with Baker (2016), international students need to develop the knowledge, skills and awareness required for effective intercultural communication during study abroad. The findings, therefore, carry practical implications for educators and institutions. Introducing sojourners to these identified linguistic, social, and intercultural strategies, through both formal and informal programmes, can support their multidimensional adjustment and enhance their transversal competences throughout the mobility journey.

It is also prudent to assess the limitations of this study alongside its findings. Although the limitations are minimised through this study where possible, some still persist unavoidably. This study adopts a multiple-case study approach focusing on a particular group of resourceful Chinese-speaking sojourners. However, this does not intend to conduct an experiment, test a hypothesis, or generalise the findings to a wider population. Moreover, as this research is conducted at a university in southeast England, one of the Russell Group universities, the findings may not represent students studying at other institutions, such as polytechnic universities. Therefore, the applicability of this research to sojourners from different academic levels or cultural backgrounds may be constrained.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to understanding how international students mediate language, identity, and emotion within complex eco-social systems. By illuminating the interplay of agency, affordances, and strategy use, it offers insights into fostering transcultural engagement and adaptive learning in an increasingly interconnected world.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for this research. We would also like to thank all the participants for their time and valuable contributions to the study. Sincere appreciation is extended to the reviewers and the editor-in-chief for their constructive feedback and insightful suggestions, which have greatly helped to refine and strengthen this work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council.

Notes on contributors

Xinyang Lu holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and was a Research Fellow in the Department of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at the University of Southampton, UK. Xinyang worked extensively in the area of international students' language and socio-cultural issues during their integration in the UK. Her main research areas cover Intercultural Communications, Language Learning Strategies, Identity, Agency, Social Networks and Transcultural Studies. Xinyang was the principal investigator of the research project: 'An Investigation of International Students' Linguistic and Sociocultural Adjustments in the UK'. She has been awarded by ESRC South Coast DTP with a total grant value of £117,000 for leading this project.

Vanessa Mar-Molinero is a Senior Teaching Fellow in Academic Practice at the University of Southampton. Vanessa co-founded the SotonSmartSkills hub (www.smartskills.soton.ac.uk) together with Chris Lewis, which includes a wide range of blended learning modules for home and international students, enhancing their digital literacies for education, academic skills, and independent learning and facilitates the transition to Higher Education in the U.K. As part of the hub, she also coordinates the Language and Academic English Advising Service. Vanessa is also the curricular lead on eLearning for ACIS.

Vicky Wright is a Professor and the Director of University Language Strategy in Modern Languages and Linguistics at the University of Southampton. She is also the vice-chair of the University Council of Modern Languages, which is a UK-wide umbrella association working with other professional associations and national bodies to represent Languages in the UK higher education sector.

Ying Zheng is a Professor in Languages, Cultures & Linguistics at the University of Southampton. She is the Director of Postgraduate Recruitment & Admissions in the School of Humanities. She is also the UK Director of the Confucius Institute. Before joining the University of Southampton, Ying worked as a Psychometrician and Director of Research (2009–2013) in the Language Testing Division of Pearson, London, a world-leading multinational education company. She obtained her MEd (2005) and PhD (2009) in Cognitive Studies from Queen's University, Canada, specialising in Second Language Testing and Assessment.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the research institution's Ethics and Research Governance Online (ERGO) System with ID 28265.

ORCID

Xinyang Lu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5587-3114>
Ying Zheng  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2574-0358>

References

- Badwan, K., & Simpson, J. (2022). Ecological orientations to sociolinguistic scale: Insights from study abroad experiences. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 13(2), 267–286. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2018-0113>
- Baker, W. (2016). English as an academic lingua franca and intercultural awareness: Student mobility in the trans-cultural university. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 16(3), 437–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2016.1168053>
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833767>
- Benson, P. (2013). Drifting in and out of view: Autonomy and the social individual. In P. Benson & L. Cooker (Eds.), *The applied linguistic individual: Sociocultural approaches to identity, agency and autonomy* (pp. 75–89). Equinox.
- Benson, P., & Huang, J. (2013). Autonomy, agency, and identity in foreign and second language education. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 36(1), 7–28. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2013-0002>
- Block, D. (2003). *The social turn in second language acquisition*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Coleman, J. (2013). Researching whole people and whole lives. In C. Kinginger (Ed.), *Social and cultural dimensions of language learning in study abroad* (pp. 17–44). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/llt.37.02col>
- Coupland, N., Sarangi, S., & Candlin, C. (2014). *Sociolinguistics and social theory*. Longman. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315839967>
- Creese, A., Takhi, J., & Blackledge, A. (2016). Reflexivity in team ethnography: Using researcher vignettes. In M. Martin-Jones & D. Martin (Eds.), *Researching multilingualism: Critical and ethnographic perspectives* (pp. 203–214). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315405346>

- Damşa, C., Nerland, M., & Andreidakis, Z. E. (2019). An ecological perspective on learner-constructed learning spaces. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 50(5), 2075–2089. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12855>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, N. C. (2019). Essentials of a theory of language cognition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(S1), 39–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12532>
- Gao, A. (2007). Language learning experiences and learning strategy research: Voices of a mainland Chinese student in Hong Kong. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(2), 193–207. <https://doi.org/10.2167/illt011.0>
- Gao, A. (2010). *Strategic language learning: The roles of agency and context*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847692450>
- Gibson, J. J. (2013). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Lawrence Erlbaum. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203767764>
- HESA. (2024). <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>
- Howard, M. (2019). *Study abroad, second language acquisition and interculturality*. Blue Ridge Summit. <https://doi.org/10.21832/howard4146>
- Isabelli-Garcia, C. L., & Isabelli, C. (2020). *Researching second language acquisition in the study abroad learning environment: An introduction for student researchers*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25157-4>
- Jackson, J. (2018). *Interculturality in international education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429490026>
- Jackson, J. (2019). *Online intercultural education and study abroad*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315098760-8>
- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2011). *Researching Chinese learners: Skills, perceptions and intercultural adaptations*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amr035>
- Kramsch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal*, 249–252. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2006.00395_3.x
- Kramsch, C., & Steffensen, S. V. (2008). Ecological perspectives on second language acquisition and socialisation. In N. H. Hornberger (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and education*. (pp. 2595–2606). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-30424-3_194
- Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2008). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2167/le127b.0>
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2019). On language learner agency: A complex dynamic systems theory perspective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(S1), 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12536>
- Lu, X., Mar-Molinero, V., & Wright, V. (2022). Special issue: Papers from the AILA 2021 symposium. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 13 (2), 224–247. <https://doi.org/10.37237/130204>
- Menezes, V. (2011). Affordances for language learning beyond the classroom. In P. Benson & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom* (pp. 59–71). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306790_6
- Mercer, S. (2011). Understanding learner agency as a complex dynamic system. *System*, 39(4), 427–436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.08.001>
- Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2001). Changing perspectives on good language learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(2), 307–322. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587650>
- Oxford, R. L. (2003). Toward a more systematic model of L2 learner autonomy. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 75–91). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504684_5
- Oxford, R. (2013). *Teaching and researching language learning strategies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315838816>
- Page, A. G. (2019). Ethnic enclaves transcending space: Chinese international students' social networks in a European university town. *Asian Ethnicity* 20(4), 418–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1570816>
- Palfreyman, D. (2011). Family, friends, and learning beyond the classroom: Social networks and social capital in language learning. In P. Benson & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom* (pp. 17–34). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306790_3
- Palfreyman, D. (2014). The ecology of learner autonomy. In G. Murray (Ed.), *Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning* (pp. 175–191). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137290243_10
- Phakiti, A., & Paltridge, B. (2015). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Bloomsbury Academic
- Plonsky, L. (2011). The effectiveness of second language strategy instruction: A meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 61(4), 993–1038. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00663.x>
- Redmer, G. (2022). Self-regulation in an advanced language learner: A case study of language learning strategies. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 13(1), 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.37237/130104>
- Scott, C., Safdar, S., Desai Trilokekar, R., & El Masri, A. (2015). International students as 'ideal immigrants' in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers' assumptions and the lived experiences of international students. *Comparative and International Education*, 43(3), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v43i3.9261>

Smith, R., & Khawaja, N. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(5), 699–713. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004>

Starfield, S. (2015). Ethnographic research. In B. Paltridge & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Research methods in applied linguistics: A practical resource* (pp. 137–152). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sundqvist, P. (2011). A possible path to progress: Out-of-school English language learners in Sweden. In P. Benson & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom* (pp. 106–118). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306790_9

Tweed, A. D. & Reinders, H. (2023). Agency and affordances in study abroad. *Education Sciences*, 13(4), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13040327>

UNESCO. (2024). *Global flow of tertiary-level students*. www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx

Urban Dictionary. (2018). *Urban dictionary*. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Chinese%20Phantom>

van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Kluwer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-7912-5>

van Lier, L. (2007). Action-based teaching, autonomy and identity. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1(1), 46–65. <https://doi.org/10.2167/illt42.0>

van Lier, L. (2008). Agency in the classroom. In J. P. Lantolf & M. E. Poehner (Eds.), *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp. 163–186). Equinox Publishing Ltd.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1980). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>

Zhang, L. (2023). ‘It’s kind of like a middle ground’: Students’ strategic management of silence in multicultural group work. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 23(4), 399–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2125522>

Zheng, W. (2017). Beyond cultural learning and preserving psychological well-being: Chinese international students’ constructions of intercultural adjustment from an emotion management perspective. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 17(1), 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2017.1261673>

Appendix A: Participant Profiles

Main participants (Pseudonym)	Gender & Age	Location of birth & First language	Degree & Faculty	Accommodation & Flatmates	Setting for Participant Observations	Length of Event Attendance
Wendy	Female & 22 years old	Mainland China & Mandarin Chinese	Master’s in Finance	University student accommodation (mixed-language flatmates)	Language Exchange Event	Attended two hours of the three-hour event
Claire	Female & 31 years old	Mainland China & Mandarin Chinese/ Cantonese	Master’s in Fashion Marketing	Private student halls (studio)	Language Exchange Event	Attended two hours of the three-hour event
Yolanda	Female & 30 years old	Taiwan & Mandarin Chinese/ Hakka	PhD in Modern Languages	Private student halls (studio)	Language Exchange Event	Attended one and a half hours of the three-hour event
Louis	Male & 22 years old	Mainland China & Mandarin Chinese	Master’s in TESOL	University student accommodation (mixed-language flatmates)	Drink Night	Attended the full three-hour event
Zack	Male & 18 years old	Mainland China & Mandarin Chinese	Bachelor’s in ECS	University student accommodation (mixed-language flatmates)	Football Event	Completed the one and a half hour football match but declined post-match activities