6 Minding the expectation gap – student expectations pre-study abroad in China

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Abstract

Study Abroad (SA) can be expected to promote personal growth, future employability, greater intercultural awareness, adaptability, and efficacy, alongside language improvement. However, students can encounter high thresholds to meeting their own expectations, and may struggle with personal and academic transition into and on return from SA. This study reports on the initial stage of a longitudinal survey-based study of the whole SA experience for a group of UK-based students of Chinese – presenting here students' pre-departure expectations and goals. Participants had high positive expectations of linguistic gains, adaptability, and knowledge about life in China, but were less aware of broader personal gains in employability, while cultural gains for some suggested a focus on individualised 'cultural consumption'. We discuss implications for support offered pre-SA to better shape student expectations of realistic benefits and probable challenges, particularly for less familiar SA contexts such as for anglophone students in China.

Keywords: study abroad, student expectations, China year abroad, YA preparation and challenges, linguistic development, sociocultural adaptation.

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1.   Introduction

Personal, cultural, and academic transition pre- and post-SA can be very challenging (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017; Paige et al., 2009; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). Many students' experiences of SA are highly varied, and expectations may rarely be met (Kinginger, 2011; McLeod & Wainwright, 2009), often with demotivating results (Wright & Schartner, 2013), or even a sense of 'expectation violation' (Bell, 2016). Questions of personal, cultural, and academic transition pre- and post-SA become particularly challenging for students going to more culturally and linguistically distant countries, such as China.

Despite the explosion of UK student numbers now studying Mandarin, not much research has been done on expectations of such learners during SA (Wright, 2018). We assume that such students should be highly motivated both by the personal challenge in taking on what is considered to be a hard language, and by the chance to learn about China's society and culture, aiming to gain employability opportunities as China plays an increasingly central role in global affairs (Jiani, 2017).

Yu (2010) has stressed the importance for students of "careful psychological and academic preparation for their overseas study and life before coming to China" (p. 317). Hence, we are conducting a small-scale longitudinal project on students' experiences of SA in China from one UK university, tracking student expectations and motivations from pre-departure through to their re-entry back into the home university, aiming to explore matches and mismatches between expectations and realities.

2.   Presentation of our study

Here we report on the first stage of our study, tapping students' pre-departure motivations, expectations, and concerns about different aspects of their SA experience.

2.1.   University context for data collection

In this study, students at the home institution start Chinese *ab initio*, and do compulsory SA after one year of study, choosing one of three optional destinations. In terms of contact hours and workload, the Year 1 (Y1) study is very intensive, aiming for high pre-departure language proficiency (approximating to the third level of the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, A2/B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages equivalent) to aid linguistic integration and academic and socio-cultural adaptation, in line with research suggesting that "the better-prepared students are often the ones that gain most from study abroad" (DeKeyser, 2010, p. 89). Three SA introduction workshops are laid on during students' Y1; post-SA students are invited to attend two of these to give advice from their point of view. Students are given a departmental SA handbook and three guides relating to academic practices, accommodation, and life in China, written by the post-SA students. Pre-SA students are expected to be proactive in reading the handbook and student guides, and asking questions in the third (final) workshop, to help develop autonomy even at the SA preparation stage.

2.2.   Participants and data design

All Y1 students (n=60) from a single cohort were invited to take part in our study, via an online survey or a face-to-face interview. Recruitment was carried out at the end of that cohort's Y1 (2017-2018), so survey/interview replies were based on knowledge students had gained during university SA preparations up to this point. Full ethical protocols for informed consent were followed in line with university research requirements; all participation was voluntary.

We recruited 16 participants (ten survey respondents, six interview participants), a mix of UK and EU students, including both single-honours courses (Chinese only) and joint-honours courses (e.g. Chinese with Management Studies). Participants were asked five open-ended questions, based on the literature (e.g. Kim et al., 2015; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). The questions were as follows.

- What are your motivations for studying abroad?

- What are your expectations in academic/linguistic gains?

- What are your expectations in socio-cultural and personal gains (including career benefits)?

- What are your expectations of teaching methods?

- What concerns and apprehensions do you have?

The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed, then collated with the online survey responses. All data were reviewed by both authors for consistency in thematic analysis. Data was coded to anonymise participants (Interviewee 1=I1, Interviewee 2=I2, Survey respondent 1=S1, etc). To some extent, motivations, expectations, and concerns all overlapped in the participants' comments, but we present the data in relation to the separate headings, as detailed below.

3.   Results and discussion

3.1.   General motivations relating to studying abroad

Participants expressed a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational goals, but were all very positive in relation to both general and China-specific SA expectations – they looked forward to a good overall SA experience, broadening their horizons, meeting other international students, gaining first-hand experience of the country and improving their language abilities through immersion rather than being limited to the classroom. They highlighted the value of experiencing life somewhere new and exciting, making Chinese friends, wanting to learn more about life in China, and 'seeing China in action'. Such a positive orientation was good to see, but we are aware it could lead to a mismatch with reality, so the next stages of our surveys (during and post-SA) will address this issue carefully.

3.2. Expectations in linguistic gains

In general, most participants wanted to improve their confidence in the language and expected to be able to make significant progress. There was some desire to expand vocabulary, mainly relating to learning everyday expressions, or more natural/colloquial vocabulary so that they could handle a wider range of topics.

> "I am keen to make the most of every opportunity. For me I especially just want to feel confident in my own language ability and not constantly doubting myself over what I know" (S2).

> "I think every skill will be improved, especially listening – the thing I lack most right now. And also fluency in speaking – speaking more confidently" (I2).

> "I expect to be very fluent by the end of the year, to be able to maintain a conversation about general topics and able to understand Chinese people as they speak" (S8).

3.3. Expectations of social-cultural and personal gains

Many participants claimed they wanted to expand their cultural experience; they were curious about Chinese culture and society, and expressed a desire to see the art, try the food, and travel around. Closer examination of comments revealed to some extent a perspective of being a consumer of cultural difference, rather than a wish to develop greater intercultural awareness and empathy; this aspect is not yet, to our knowledge, widely reported in current literature, so will be monitored throughout our study. However, a small number of participants specifically mentioned improving intercultural communication skills, a greater open-mindedness, and a sensitivity towards different cultures. Delving into China's history would help them understand its impact on modern-day China. By spending time with Chinese people of all ages and background, they expected to appreciate Chinese culture better, with more understanding of how life works in such a 'vast and diverse' country.

> "I think that it will allow me… to appreciate the differences between Chinese and British cultures and the issues facing them both" (S7).

> "I expect to get to know Chinese people's habits and traditions and appreciate them, learn how Chinese people live, how they perceive their country and their point of view" (S8).

SA was also perceived by many participants as an opportunity for personal growth and development, though often expressed in relation to general SA-based challenges (see below). Most participants talked about the values of adaptability and of developing as a person, expecting to have to go out of their 'comfort zone', which would help them be more confident.

> "The experience of being away from home for a prolonged period of time and in such a different culture will be challenging, but hopefully it will be rewarding in the end by providing skills such as resilience, tolerance, and perseverance" (S10).

Relating to employability, only two explicitly identified SA with career prospects, e.g. using their degree to get work in a Chinese context (S8) or building personal connections to help employment options (S6). Several participants were still undecided as to what they would like to do after their degrees, so had not thought about the employability aspect of SA.

> "I probably won't think much about employability when I am in China, but mostly when I come back, because in China I will focus on studying the language" (I5).

3.4.   Expectations of academic environment and teaching methods

Participants clearly expected there to be some differences between home and host universities. Teaching in China would be more repetitive than in the UK, with fewer chances to interact with teachers or other classmates. There would

be a heavier workload, and more rote learning – drilling and memorisation; overall the experience would be similar to being back at school. Teaching staff were expected to be caring and efficient, but stricter and more critical, e.g. over homework or exam preparation. However, participants seemed to be ready for this style of teaching. Some mentioned that they thought this more traditional way of teaching suited them better personally.

> "Even if the classes might be slightly boring, we are very lucky that we can go and practise skills like reading and speaking just by walking around the city… So actually we will be using lots of different styles of learning which I think will add diversity and excitement to the way we learn" (S2).

> "I'm not overly worried about the teaching methods being too hard as I know the teachers will definitely want us to succeed. However, I do expect to experience quite a lot of culture shock when first experiencing the new teaching methods first hand" (S3).

> "I do quite like the Chinese style, because you can just take in the information. I am not worried about that" (I1).

3.5.   Concerns and apprehensions

Pre-departure concerns revealed the extent of perceived challenges and barriers felt by participants before the SA started, though it seemed these were more about SA in general rather than being very China-specific. Participants expected that culture shock would be extreme, and that having enough language for effective communication would be the biggest challenge. Many felt they lacked confidence in managing the natural context abroad when speaking to locals or encountering local dialects.

> "I expect that initially there will still be some sort of language barrier… however I think that this will be resolved by just persevering and taking any opportunities to speak… I think coping with this will involve

> having the support network of other students from the home university but also trying to get involved in activities outside of class and perhaps even outside of the university" (S7).

Despite these perceived challenges, participants also expressed a degree of self-efficacy, resolving to overcome any language barriers by engaging and interacting with local people and speaking Chinese as much as possible. There was also evidence of self-coaching and being realistic – admitting 'it's OK to ask for help' and not being harsh on themselves.

Overall, participants seemed relatively realistic, suggesting that in terms of academic and personal experiences, they were aware of likely challenges but also felt reasonably empowered to handle them. Expectations of linguistic and cultural benefits appeared high, and we will track how far these were met in reality in our further surveys.

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to gain some insights into motivations, expectations, and perceptions of challenges during SA in China, in a group of UK students after one year's *ab initio* study. Through thematic analysis of pre-departure questionnaires and interview data, we saw that participants generally felt aware of both benefits and difficulties, including differences in academic environment, and a perception of wide language and culture gaps, though these were to some extent generalisable to any SA experience rather than to China specifically. Participants seemed to be mostly positive and realistic about how to handle these, suggesting that, at least in this cohort, there may be less risk of 'expectation violation' than found elsewhere (Bell, 2016). There were high expectations of linguistic and cultural gains, so these may be the areas most at risk of not being met during SA. There seemed to be less awareness of broader gains from learning about Chinese people and culture, treating this aspect of SA to some extent as individualised 'cultural consumption'; participants also lacked understanding in how personal development could lead to wider employability benefits. Further longitudinal

data in the next stages of our study will shed more light on the extent to which expectations and reality converge or not for students' experiences during and post-SA.

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