

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Beyond 'Study' Abroad: Remapping the "Exosystem" in International Education and a Comparison between Chinese and British Foreign Language Learners

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:**

By aiming at 'study' abroad, student sojourners' intercultural experiences beyond higher education settings are often, likely to be, overlooked. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory, this qualitative study provided a 'mirror-image' investigation on foreign language learners' both academic and non-academic acculturation experiences in one-year Study Abroad Programmes in the context of their target languages and cultures (i.e. the UK and China respectively). Focusing on the concept of "exosystem" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.40) in which student sojourners' acculturation experiences beyond higher education settings are primarily constructed, findings highlight the major difference among these two cohorts and suggest the crucial role of outside-campus settings in their study abroad experiences. Understanding this dimension will contribute towards assisting the increasing requirements for intercultural support before, during and after future students' educational experiences abroad. It also provides meaningful insights for better coping with the current challenge to student mobility brought by the global health crisis.

**Paper:**

This study is within the context of internationalisation in worldwide higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on Study Abroad Programmes (SAPs) for foreign language learners. A one-term or one-year abroad programme is now embedded in Foreign Studies degree programmes in many HEIs all over the world, either as an optional (e.g. in China) or compulsory component (i.e. in the UK). Nevertheless, there are limited comprehensive insights into these non-degree-oriented foreign language sojourners' study abroad experiences in the countries of their target languages and cultures within the specific context of short-term SAPs. In particular, by aiming at 'study' abroad, student sojourners' intercultural experiences beyond higher education settings are often, likely to be, overlooked. This has led to an inadequate understanding of the overall experiences as well as the distinct challenges that this specific cohort may face in this relatively short period. Since these foreign language sojourners are likely to endeavour to learn both the language and the culture of the host environment in not only host universities but also real-life situations outside the campuses. It is also arguable that for foreign language sojourners, their acculturation experiences beyond higher

education settings are likely to be expected to be even more beneficial for their target language and culture learning than within their host universities.

This study aims to respond to this gap with three specific research questions were formulated for the present study: 1) How do Chinese foreign language learners experience acculturation in the UK through Study Abroad Programmes? How does it compare with British foreign language learners' experiences of acculturation in China? 2) What factors facilitate Chinese and British foreign language learners' acculturation experiences? What factors serve as barriers? and 3) What are the first-hand lessons (benefits and challenges) when foreign language learners are exposed to the target language and culture? In seeking to address these questions, this study provides a meaningful 'mirror-image' investigation to explore and compare the acculturation experiences of two cohorts: a) 15 English language learners in China who took one-year SAPs to the UK, and b) 18 British learners in Chinese Studies who went to China on one-year SAPs. This study adopted purely qualitative approach where creative research techniques (i.e. vignettes and metaphors) were also employed to encourage the participants' in-depth reflections and introspection of their experiences, with a view to facilitating and complementing the semi-structured interview method that was primarily used for collecting data. Thematic analysis was utilised as a deductive data analysis approach with the assistance of the NVivo qualitative software.

Drawing upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development and focusing on the concept of "exosystem" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.40), findings highlight the major difference among Chinese and British foreign language learners' one-year acculturation experiences. They also suggest the crucial role of outside-campus settings in their study abroad experiences, the key influential factors, both personal and environmental. By adding this outer layer to the traditional understanding of 'study' abroad, a fresh and more nuanced insight to remap the role of "exosystem" in international education and these foreign language sojourners' acculturation experiences is offered to unpack the intricacies in their' short-term SAP sojourns. Also, the findings from the shared experiences of the two cohorts of short-term SAP students offer 'mirror-image' insights as well as a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the (explicit, implicit and potential) bioecological-related factors that impact these foreign language learners' overall acculturation experiences (both academic and non-academic). It is expected that this finding will have practical utility not only for foreign language learners but also for other similar groups of international students, helping them better prepare and personalise their own acculturation experiences during their sojourns. A deeper and comparative understanding of the two groups of SAP learners can assist HEIs in offering richer practical intercultural support before, during and after students' educational experiences abroad, and in improving intercultural pedagogy in future education, e.g. through foreign language education and SAP design. This 'mirror-image' investigation also offers beneficial information (e.g. facilitators, barriers, benefits and challenges) for both Chinese and British student sojourners and HEIs, enabling comparative insights on the experiences of their peers and partner HEIs (or other HEIs conducting similar programmes). It also provides meaningful insights for better coping with the current challenge to student mobility brought by the global health crisis.

## **References:**

## Reference

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3, 37-43.