Developing literacy or focusing on interaction: New Zealand students' strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning during study abroad in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an inquiry that interpreted a group of New Zealand students' strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning during study abroad in China through the lens of identity. In this study, we encouraged 15 participants to write reflective journals and conducted group interviews and online communication to examine their strategic efforts to learn Chinese. The analysis revealed that the participants' identity imaginations were closely associated with their strategic learning efforts across different settings, including literacy-oriented strategic efforts in the classroom and interaction-oriented strategic efforts outside the classroom. The findings also suggest that the participants made strategic efforts to seek opportunities and resources for practicing spoken Chinese outside the classroom because they were positioned in undesirable ways by instructors and course content in the classroom. These findings offer insights into the crucial role of learner identity in mediating language learners' strategic efforts during study abroad in China. They imply that formal learning in the classroom needs to be synergized by informal learning outside the classroom, and educational stakeholders should revise the traditional design of study abroad programs to better support international students' language learning efforts.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade Chinese has emerged as increasingly important language, taught and learnt as an international language around the world (Gong, Gao, & Lyu, 2020; Gong, Lai, & Gao, 2020; Moloney & Xu, 2015). Because study abroad is traditionally regarded as an ideal context for language learning, more and more international students are relocating to China to pursue their academic studies through the medium of Chinese. In 2018, 492,200 international students from 196 countries/regions were attending Chinese tertiary institutions, and almost half of them were learning Chinese as an additional language

(Xinhuanet. June 03, 2019). While study abroad students are assumed having abundant opportunities to immerse themselves in the target culture and use the target language of the host community (Block, 2007; Diao, 2017; Kinginger, 2013), they often face the challenge of how to "become sufficiently engaged in local communicative settings" in their study abroad context (Kinginger, 2013, p. 342). Identity can influence both the quality of language learning experiences and learners' strategic efforts in study abroad settings, and a number of studies have examined the identity of study abroad learners and its complex relationship with strategic language learning (e.g., Cervatiuc, 2009; Gao, Cheng, & Kelly, 2008; Hajar, 2017; Kinginger, 2008; Norton, 2013). However, in these studies the voice of international students studying abroad in China has been little heard to any great extent (Li & Li, 2020; Ma, Gong, Gao, & Xiang, 2017; Tian & Lowe, 2014).

In light of the social turn and sociocultural theory in second language acquisition research (Block, 2003; Darvin, 2019, pp. 245−264; Norton & Toohey, 2011), researchers are increasingly attending to the social nature of language learning and highlighting language learners' negotiation with sociocultural conditions in pursuit of linguistic and non-linguistic gains (e.g., social status: Norton & Toohey, 2011; upward social mobility: Gao, 2010). Many studies have been conducted to investigate the interrelatedness of learner identity and language learning based on learners' experiences in the context of learning English as a second/foreign language (Li & Li, 2020). These studies consistently report that the English learners' identity played an important role in shaping their strategic learning efforts, such as language learning strategies (e.g., Gao, 2008; Hajar, 2017). However, international students in China remain one of the most under-examined language learners thus far, and little attention has been paid to the relationship between international students' identity and their strategic efforts to learn the Chinese language (Du, 2015). Hence, in order to address this knowledge gap, the identity of Chinese language learners and its relationship with their strategic language learning efforts has become an important area of investigation.

China has been the most popular Asian study destination for international students since 2016 (People.cn. June 04, 2019), and Chinese immersion programs have thrived in China over the past decade. In particular, since China is playing an increasingly prominent role in global politics, economics, and culture, especially in the Asia-Pacific area, more and more New Zealand students are keen to promote their Chinese language proficiency and intercultural competence through study abroad programs in China (Xinhuanet, November 22, 2019). According to studies by Holmes (2005, 2006), there are a range of differences between New Zealand and Chinese students regarding interpersonal communication and classroom interaction patterns in the higher education environment. With regard to interpersonal communication styles, while New Zealand students typically prefer expressing explicit information through verbal messages and trying to clarify any vagueness or ambiguity during communication, Chinese students tend to be implicit and avoid direct disagreement by maintaining silence and expressing a willingness to listen in conversations. In terms of communication in the classroom, New Zealand teachers mostly adopt an inquiry-based mode, encouraging cooperative and interactive communication and original opinions. In contrast, in Chinese classrooms opportunities for teacher-student interaction are rare and the teacher is generally seen as a model and authority (Holmes, 2005, 2006). At the same time, Chinese teachers often attach a great deal of importance to rote learning and memorization during foreign language education.

Nevertheless, there have been few studies specifically designed to investigate New Zealand students' Chinese language learning efforts in China through the lens of identity. Thus, there is a pressing need for more systematic research to address this issue. Using identity as a lens, the present study attempts to examine New Zealand students' strategic efforts devoted to Chinese language learning during their study abroad in China. The article begins with a short review of the relationship between learner identity and strategic language learning. It then explains the data collection and analysis methods and the research findings. Finally, it ends with relevant discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Language learners' identity and strategic language learning

Over the past three decades, the emergence of the "social turn" (Block, 2003) in second language education has increasingly challenged the domination of psychological and cognitive theories in second language education research (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Gao & Zhang, 2011, pp. 25−41; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Learner identity emerges as a significant issue when researchers endorsing sociocultural perspectives pay more attention to examining the social, cultural, and even political context of language learning (Block, 2003; Darvin, 2019, pp. 245−264; Kinginger, 2013). Language learning is seen as combining "personal transformation with the evolution of social structures" (Wenger, 2000, p. 227), and it is also "a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 432).

Recent decades have seen increased research interest in the relationship between second/foreign language learning and identity, and researchers have approached learner identity from diverse perspectives. For instance, foregrounding the potential "negotiation of difference" that takes place in second language acquisition in immersion settings, Block (2007) conceptualized identity as "negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future" (p. 27). In the same vein, Morita (2012, pp. 26−41) interpreted identity as a contingent social and interactional process within a given discourse community. Specifically, in terms of language learning, the same individual learner could build different types of identity through interacting with different people and participating across different learning contexts. Recent work adopting post-structural viewpoints has tended to define the identity of language learners as a socially embedded and discursively constructed concept that denotes "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Underlying these theories or arguments is an understanding that identity is multiple, fluid, and dynamic across social and linguistic contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

An increasing number of studies have attested to the connection between second language learners' identity and their strategic language learning (e.g., Diao, 2017; Kinginger, 2008; McKinney & van Pletzen, 2004). Strategic language learning is often regarded as learners' efforts to enhance their own language learning and/or use through different strategies or techniques (Cohen, 1998; Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006). Research interest in language learning strategies can be traced back to Rubin's (1975) seminal work on the good language learner, and interest still remains intense given strategies' crucial role in promoting language teaching and learning effectiveness. Language learning strategies used to be defined as a static cognitive choice (e.g., Dörnyei, 2014; Oxford, 1990). However, in recent years researchers endorsing sociocultural perspectives on language learning (e.g., Gao, 2008; Hajar, 2018; Norton & Toohey, 2011) have emphasized the dynamic and shifting nature of language learning strategies according to language learners' different learning purposes, changing educational contexts, and various social agents. Through a sociocultural lens, language learners' strategic efforts not only improve their linguistic knowledge and pragmatic competence, but also help them to pursue their desired identities and integrate themselves into a given target language community (Cohen & Griffiths, 2015; Gao et al., 2008; Oxford, 2003, pp. 75–92).

For example, Norton (1997) documented an immigrant woman Mai's investment and resistance in English learning in Canada. Gao et al. (2008) examined mainland Chinese research students' strategic learning efforts to promote their English proficiency in Hong Kong. Diao (2017) investigated three American bi/multilingual students' experiences in negotiations of standard and non-standard Mandarin Chinese and identity when studying abroad in China. While yielding various results concerning the impact of transnational/transborder learners' identity on their language learning efforts and achievements, these studies consistently point out that learners' identity was closely associated with their strategic efforts or resistance towards the target language learning. For most language learners, it can be a difficult process to build a tangible and practical connection with the host community through language learning efforts and identity construction and reconstruction.

Researchers have also explored the interaction between language learners' identity and their strategic language learning efforts. For instance, Gao (2008) analyzed vocational students' English learning in mainland China and indicated that the students usually used exam-oriented learning strategies to pursue their desired identity in a competitive academic environment. Hajar (2017) examined two postgraduate Syrian students' English learning strategies in their homeland and in Britain, and pointed out the ongoing interaction between their identity negotiation and their use of compulsory and voluntary strategies. While most of the previous research on the identity of language learners and their strategic language learning has been conducted in the context of learning English, nevertheless this research provides many relevant insights, and has motivated us to undertake this inquiry on international students' identity and their strategic efforts to learn the Chinese language during study abroad in China. The study addressed the following question:

How did New Zealand students' strategic efforts to learn the Chinese language interact with their identities during study abroad in China?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context and participants

This study elicited and interpreted experiential accounts of identity and strategic language learning efforts from a group of New Zealand students learning Chinese during study abroad in China. The participants originally learned Chinese as an additional language program offered by a university in New Zealand (for more details, please also see Gong, Gao, Li, & Lai, 2020; Gong, Ma, Hsiang, & Wang, 2020). Details of the participants can be found in Table 1; showing that the participants were heterogeneous concerning their personal background demographics, such as their age, Chinese language level, and linguistic background.

Table 1
Participants' profiles.

No.	Name	Age	Gender	Language level	Major	Chinese heritage background
1	Emma	18	Female	Beginner	Arts	No
2	Olivia	19	Female	Lower intermediate	Design	Yes
3	Ava	22	Female	Intermediate	Arts	No
4	Isabella	23	Female	Intermediate	Chinese & Japanese	No
5	Sophia	24	Female	Beginner	Arts	No
6	Emily	44	Female	Intermediate	Arts	No
7	Grace	59	Female	Lower intermediate	Linguistics	Yes (Cantonese)
8	Harry	20	Male	Beginner	Information science	Yes
9	Luke	28	Male	Beginner	Arts	No
10	Logan	29	Male	Intermediate	Arts	No
11	Mason	31	Male	Intermediate	Business	No
12	Teddy	44	Male	Advanced	Arts	No
13	Hugo	45	Male	Advanced	Chinese	No
14	Louis	51	Male	Beginner	Arts	No
15	Albert	54	Male	Intermediate	Arts	No

Note: all names are pseudonyms.

This program offered both face-to-face and online distance courses at beginner, intermediate, and advanced level, with students on both types of course using the same learning materials and studying at the same pace. To promote New Zealanders' bi/multilingual competence and intercultural understanding, in 2013 the New Zealand government initiated the Prime Minister's Scholarship for Asia (PMSA), awarded to individuals studying or researching in Asia. With the aim of enhancing their Chinese proficiency and learning about Chinese society and culture, these students obtained PMSA support and voluntarily took part in a study abroad program in a university in Beijing, China, which lasted six weeks. The program focused on improving the students' listening and reading comprehension skills, which were taught by native Chinese teachers and mostly with Chinese as the only medium of instruction. The participants were fifteen students from the study abroad program. The only criteria for recruiting participants to the research were that they were native English speakers studying Chinese in China, and they would share their sense of self and their understanding of their relation with the Chinese community and their strategic efforts to learn Chinese. Consent forms were obtained before their participation, and all the participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the research.

These 15 participants had had limited exposure to Chinese culture or community prior to their arrival in China, although they may have had a few preconceived views about Chinese society, such as mainstream culture and local lifestyles. For instance, from their self-reports we noted that many of them thought the teaching and learning style in China would be similar to that in New Zealand.

3.2. Data collection

Data for the present research were collected from multiple sources to provide a basis for triangulation, in which different types of data can be systematically compared to minimize reactivity and other problems with data validity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). To address the research question, we encouraged the participants to write reflective journals, conducted group interviews, and engaged in ongoing online communication with them. A reflective journal is both a product and a process, which helps researchers "capture an experience, record an event, explore our feeling, or make sense of what we know" (Boud, 2001, p. 9). In particular, it encourages research participants to elaborate and document their inner sense of who they are (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012), to consider and analyze their relationships with the local community and others (Norton & Toohey, 2011), and to reflect on and articulate their desires for the future in terms of language learning and use practices (Norton, 2013). These advantages are in accord with the research question of the present study. To capture the New Zealand students' identities and their strategic Chinese learning efforts in their six-week study abroad program, three questions/prompts were adopted to guide their reflections: 1) How are you improving your Chinese proficiency in China? 2) How are you developing connections with others in the local community in China? 3) In what ways do you feel you have changed, and how do you expect to change? The reflective journals were collected each week. These weekly journals comprised 86 entries in total, each of which was about one single-spaced typewritten-page in length. All the entries were identified with a code; for instance, "Emma/R/W4" meant the entry was Emma's reflection entry from the fourth week.

Group interviewing "involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion" (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). It was employed because the naturalistic conversational situation it creates helps to obtain authentic and rich data (Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimournezhad, & Ghanbari, 2013), and its focus on the "ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues" (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656) was consistent with the nature of this research. The group interviews in the present research were framed around an interview question guideline that allowed room for the participants to talk freely about their own experiences of Chinese language learning and their viewpoints on individual identity during their academic sojourn, which enabled the interviewer to delve deeper into each participant's accounts. During the interviews, the following topics were addressed: 1) Chinese language learning and use experiences, 2) experiences of interacting and socializing with others in and outside the campus, 3) perceptions about their relation to the Chinese community, 4) expectations of how their identity may develop in the future, and 5) expectations of how their Chinese proficiency may develop in the future. Group interviews were conducted with five participants at a time in their native language, English, to minimize language barriers. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. The interview topics/questions were first reviewed and assessed by one expert and one researcher interested in second language learner identity and teaching and learning Chinese as an additional language. Then, the topics/questions and the technique were pilot-tested with two native-English-speaker students learning Chinese in a university in China. Interpretations for each item were checked, suggestions for wording were elicited, and the interview questions were revised accordingly. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim into English, and double-checked for accuracy. Participant-checking procedures were undertaken after we transcribed the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the data and the trustworthiness of the subsequent analysis (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

In addition, we continuously carried out online communication with the participating students, asking for clarification and interpretation of their opinions given in the reflective journals and the interviews, to collect further relevant information about their experiences of study abroad in China.

3.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data using Nvivo 12. The data were analyzed through a cyclical and evolving process of coding and recoding, and the themes were derived inductively from the data (Saldaña, 2015, Lai, Li, &

Gong, 2016). The first cycle of analysis comprised attribute coding and structural coding. The research questions and the literature on the association between learner identity and strategic language learning efforts informed the structural coding, which split the data into small data segments of different categories (e.g., foreigner identity, Chinese language user identity, heritage Chinese learner). Journal entries, interview transcriptions, and online communication were scrutinized reiteratively, and bits of data that were relevant and important to the theme of the study, or which struck the researchers as interesting, were first coded using the participants' original words. A second cycle of analysis was then conducted to assess the utility of the codes from the first cycle of coding, and to recode, categorize, or discard accordingly. Similar codes were aggregated into analytic categories. The initial coding of the analytic categories was then compared across the participants to find repeating ideas and supporting evidence in order to cross-validate the categories that emerged. For example, "listen and repeat the same sentences" and "keep practicing Chinese characters" were categorized under the higher-order node "literacy-oriented strategies"; and "a person can use Chinese in a real life situation" and "a speaker can be understood by Chinese locals" were clustered under "Chinese language user identity".

At the same time, patterns and relations between the categories of students' identities and their strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning were explored by reexamining the data and referring to relevant literature recurrently. For instance, the links between "future identity imaginations" and relevant strategic learning nodes such as "practicing spoken Chinese with classmates in the classroom" were analyzed, and these nodes were arranged under another higher-order node, "future identity imaginations and Chinese learning efforts". Annotations and memos were used during the data analysis to record immediate comments and reflexive thinking on the data, and the annotations and memos were further adopted to assist data coding and categorization (Maxwell, 2005).

4. Findings

The analysis of the data identified that there was a "powerful relationship" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 413) between the participants' identity and their strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning during their academic sojourn in China. From sociocultural perspectives, the participants constantly negotiated their senses of self with reference to their larger social world, and they could hold multiple identities simultaneously (Benson & Cooker, 2013, pp. 1–16) while they were learning Chinese language in a study abroad program, such as "a foreigner", "a Chinese language learner", "a Chinese language user", and so forth. Hence, learning a language during contextual transitions may be conceptualized as a continuous "self-explanatory and social alteration" (Hajar, 2018, p. 417), and also as an ongoing identity construction and reconstruction process.

The participants' accounts suggested that their strategic efforts or resistance towards Chinese language learning were shaped by their different identities. On the one hand, the participants' present or future identity imaginations affected their tangible or ideal meaningful connections with the language practices of the classroom or the local community, and their identity usually generated their desire and commitment to undertake different strategic Chinese learning efforts across different instructional settings, mainly including literacy-oriented strategic efforts in the classroom and interaction-oriented strategic efforts outside the classroom. Also, the different kinds of identities related to different strategic efforts related to Chinese learning. On the other hand, some of the participants (7/15) tended to resist current classroom practices when they were positioned in undesirable ways, such as a conventional learner in the Confucian cultural context. It should be noted that this resistance could lead to the use of other learning strategies, such as seeking out opportunities and resources outside the classroom to improve their communication ability in daily situations.

4.1. Present identity imaginations and strategic language learning

In study abroad research, "learner" and "user" are typical labels according to which study abroad participants consciously or unconsciously position themselves, based on their sense of how effectively they are able to function in a target-language-medium context (Blaj-Ward, 2017). While the language learner identity mostly related to gaining knowledge and skills (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, presentation) by studying, practicing, and being taught in formal language classroom settings, the language user identity mainly occurred when participants used the target language in their everyday lives in the local community (Benson et al., 2012).

Overall, the data analysis revealed that in the study abroad context, more participants tended to define themselves as a Chinese language user (10/15) than as a Chinese language learner (7/15), and these identities were closely associated with their strategic Chinese learning efforts. Specifically, their accounts illustrated that the participants who reported themselves as Chinese language learners (e.g., Emma, Harry, Sophia) usually deployed literacy-oriented strategies in order to follow teachers' instructional pace and mainly focused on the content of their textbooks, such as vocabulary, grammar points, and sentence patterns. Meanwhile, the participants who identified themselves as Chinese language users (e.g., Isabella, Ava, Teddy) often adopted interaction-oriented strategies to seek out practice opportunities with locals outside the classroom to promote their oral Chinese used in daily scenarios.

4.1.1. Chinese language learner identity and literacy-oriented strategic efforts

The data analysis indicated that almost half of the participants (7/15) perceived themselves as Chinese language learners, and they unanimously adopted a literacy-oriented strategy throughout the academic sojourn. Underlying such strategic

language learning efforts was a clear aim to enhance literacy competence (linguistic knowledge), mostly by memorizing and acquiring Chinese grammar points and vocabulary from their textbooks. Given that there was no pressure of examination for the participants in this program, their most tangible goal was always the teachers' instructional pace. Ava worked in an agriculture company having business connections with China. In order to follow the course progress each week, she made considerable efforts to master Chinese grammar knowledge and vocabulary in the classroom.

[1] My goal is to read the grammar points ahead of time this week, to ensure I understand the concepts well enough to pick up the meaning while reading the text aloud in class for the first time. (Ava/R/W3)

Although Ava had achieved an intermediate level in Chinese before her arrival in China, she thought that promoting her knowledge of Chinese grammar and collecting vocabulary in the textbook were important prerequisites for understanding the course content. Hence, she often tried her best to "understand the meaning of each sentence perfectly" (Ava/R/W4) in each lesson. In a similar vein, Teddy, an advanced Chinese language learner, also perceived that it was important to learn grammatical points with his teachers' assistance in the classroom in order to enhance his linguistic knowledge.

[2] The classroom work here (in China) is quite intense and very challenging for us to follow consistently. … For myself, it is unlikely for me to pick up a new sentence pattern just by listening to other speakers, but through learning and practicing it in class, I can eventually acquire new grammar. (Teddy/R/W4)

According to Teddy, without the teachers' assistance in the classroom, he was likely to fall behind their teaching pace, which caused a mismatch with his original plan of being a successful learner in China (Teddy/R/W4).

Likewise, Hugo, the only student with a Bachelor's degree in Chinese, explicitly stated that it was challenging for him to successfully follow the teachers' instructional pace although he would "listen and repeat the same sentences fifty times" (Hugo/R/W4). Specifically, from the accounts of the participants identifying themselves as Chinese language learners, it may be seen that "memorization", "reading aloud", "keeping practicing Chinese characters", and "repetition" frequently emerged as important strategic learning efforts and also as a crucial part of their classroom routine. However, in practice, because the workload during their academic sojourn was usually heavier than the participants' former learning pace in New Zealand, it was difficult for them to keep up their course work throughout their period of study abroad. This to some extent demotivated their Chinese language learning and undermined their beliefs about being a good Chinese language learner in China. Moreover, the literacy-oriented strategy seemed to suit learners who learned Chinese in isolation and in a competitive learning setting (e.g., Chinese proficiency tests), which is in accordance with the typical dialectic educational mode in Confucian societies like China. It is noteworthy that the learner identity shaped by the Chinese educational context and mediated by the teachers mismatched with the participants' original sense and understanding of a "learner" in New Zealand. Thus, the use of the literacy-oriented strategy often resulted in negative emotions and tensions throughout their academic sojourn.

4.1.2. Chinese language user identity and interaction-oriented strategic efforts

In study abroad settings, language learning is often perceived as a natural process that arises from language use, rather than only being based on the study of grammar and vocabulary from textbooks (Blaj-Ward, 2017; Hajar, 2017). Compared to the Chinese language learner identity, more participants (10/15) tended to position themselves as a Chinese language user after familiarizing themselves with the local community during the first week of their sojourn. These participants consistently used an interaction-oriented strategy to enhance their daily-communication competence. Although Luke was a beginner learner of Chinese and had never been to China before, he realized that being a language user could increase his participation and communication with Chinese locals and further his Chinese proficiency.

[3] I feel it is my responsibility to practice Chinese when I can, not simply reverting to English when I get the chance simply because it is easier. … I feel I should be trying to practice with as many local people as I can, become familiar with different styles of speech, and last but certainly not least, test if I can be understood by a variety of people, especially strangers. (Luke/R/W4)

For Luke, pragmatic competence was key in projecting himself as "a person who is able to function in the study abroad environment" (Benson et al., 2012, p. 189). For participants relocating to a different community, language use is a very valuable way to be exposed to the authentic target language context during their academic sojourn. In this sense, language use and language learning are seamlessly integrated during study abroad.

Like Luke, as Chinese language users, most of the participants often used informal or non-academic networks and resources both on and off the campus to develop their communication competence, by collecting Chinese vocabulary for daily use (e.g., Isabella, Ava, Hugo, Teddy, Grace), building confidence in speaking Chinese (e.g., Harry, Ava), improving their Chinese culture knowledge (e.g., Albert, Olivia), and enhancing their Chinese language fluency (e.g., Albert). The participants' accounts suggested that these network settings included restaurants, stores, the library, calling taxis, and travelling, and accordingly their language partners in these situations—staff, taxi drivers, even strangers—became accessible interlocutors. For instance,

when talking about their learning foci and goals, words like "vocabulary for food" (Isabella, Ava, Teddy), "quick hurried Chinese" (Hugo), and "specific vocabulary for shopping" (Grace) frequently occurred in the accounts given by the participants who projected themselves as Chinese language users. As an example, a strong link between her Chinese language user identification and interaction-strategy efforts was elaborated on by Grace.

[4] A problem still exists where at times it is still difficult to understand the sales staff reply, but I feel I am picking up more than I did four weeks ago. Therefore, I must continue to build up my specific vocabulary specific for shopping and listen out for them or use them when appropriate. (Grace/R/W4)

In the fourth week of her stay, Grace summed up her change by saying that she had come to the stage where she was a "user" of Chinese, which may be seen as a signal of her pragmatic competence enhancement.

Similarly, Teddy tended to seize any opportunity to expand his Chinese use through making friends with local Chinese people.

[5] This week I have had the chance to meet some Chinese people off campus who only speak limited English, and this has raised many subtle questions, each of which is a small lesson in itself. While walking around a nearby park I helped a young student by taking his photo and from there we became WeChat friends with a plan to help each other's language.

As with other participants, Teddy's most tangible aim with his interaction-oriented strategy was actual communication with native Chinese people. By befriending a local student and interacting with him through a Chinese social media platform, Teddy could expand his Chinese use outside the classroom. Such strategic language learning efforts, shaped by a broad outside-classroom context and mediated by social agents like strangers, was in line with his learning belief and self-identification, and generally benefited his learning motivation.

4.2. Future identity imaginations and strategic language learning

The analysis indicated that in addition to the New Zealand students' present identity imaginations, their future identity imaginations were also linked to their strategic Chinese learning efforts. One's understanding of possibilities for the future is a critical component of identity (Darvin, 2019, pp. 245–264; Norton, 2013), and people can gain membership in a community of speakers not only by engaging with others but also by imagining an affiliation with them (Wenger, 1998). Specifically, three of the participants (Albert, Harry, and Ava) perceived that they could use their Chinese and integrate into a professional community in which their bilingual/multilingual competence and cultural backgrounds could become valuable capital. For instance, as a CEO of a small company, Albert "worked with a large and diverse group of business partners in China" (Albert/R/W6). In his mind, China's vast market and investment opportunities for other countries had become a desirable community that could offer possibilities for business people like him.

[6] Any New Zealand small and medium enterprise that intends to do or is doing business with China should understand the Chinese business culture and above all the Chinese language." (Albert/R/W5)

Hence, Albert made strenuous efforts and used different learning strategies to promote his linguistic skills and inter-cultural competence during his academic sojourn, following a rigorous learning routine, including practicing spoken Chinese with classmates in the classroom, writing new characters after class, learning about Chinese culture and etiquette in and outside the classroom, and asking his teachers about learning strategies or approaches. Although Albert was an intermediate Chinese learner at the beginning, he could independently deliver a presentation to his Chinese investors entirely in Chinese by the end of his academic sojourn. Through his imagined outcome of "engaging with Chinese trading partners successfully" (Albert/R/W6), Albert was able to connect himself and his business with the increasing trade volume between China and New Zealand, and his investment in Chinese language learning could make the bridge to a vibrant Chinese economy "tangible and accessible" (Norton, 2013, p. 8). At the same time, he effectively integrated language learning resources and opportunities in and outside the classroom, which is the ideal aim of study abroad (Kinginger, 2013).

Normally, the term 'heritage language learners' refers to language students with "an ethnolinguistic affiliation to the heritage" and with some degree of proficiency in spoken or literacy skills (He, 2006, p. 588). Among the three heritage Chinese learner participants in this research, Olivia and Grace reported this kind of identity from their accounts. For instance, Olivia expressed:

[7] My mum is Chinese. I have good listening skills, but do not know how to read and write. I want to communicate with my Chinese relatives. (Olivia, Group interview one).

While Olivia and Grace identified themselves as Chinese heritage language learners, they demonstrated a strong foreigner sense similar to their New Zealand peers, given their comparatively small connection with Chinese community and culture. However, in terms of Olivia's investment in Chinese language learning, her "main focus was to be able to communicate with

Chinese relatives" (Olivia/R/W6), and integrating herself into her Chinese family was "one of the most rewarding moments" (Olivia/R/W6). Thus, during her academic sojourn she often went off-campus to practice her spoken Chinese in real situations. More interestingly, she posted a family photo with her Chinese grandparents on the online communication platform, and noted it as "my dream place". It seemed that even though Olivia's heritage identity had little impact on her actual Chinese learning, her imagined affiliation with her Chinese family and relatives shaped her strategic learning efforts.

4.3. Identity resistance and strategic language learning

The identity of language learners may not only contribute to their strategic efforts to achieve target language learning; it may also lead to opposition or resistance to classroom practices, if they are positioned in undesirable or unfamiliar ways (Block, 2007; McKinney & van Pletzen, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2011). The participants' accounts showed that almost half of them (7/15) resisted their Chinese teachers' pedagogical practices in the classroom.

National identity refers to a certain sense of commonality within a group (e.g., a nation), as represented by a complex of distinctive features such as traditions, culture, language, and so on (Edensor, 2004; Triandafyllidou, 1998). Its existence presupposes the existence of "foreigners", who do not belong to and even distinguish the ingroup regarding the relevant features. In contrast to a national identity, a foreigner status emerges when study abroad learners are positioned as outsiders by the host community (Kinginger, 2013). As an example, even though Mason had a Chinese wife and expected to achieve a high level of Chinese proficiency, he often identified himself as a foreigner throughout his period of study abroad, and he could not accept being called by his Chinese name in the classroom.

[8] Learning in a new environment, you will almost certainly encounter some differences in teaching and learning. … One of the challenges I encountered was being called by my Chinese name 李强 (Li Qiang). Being so used to being called my English name, Mason, I have never been in a position to experience anything different. … It was a little disturbing and I felt a bit silly introducing myself with a Chinese name in front of mostly European New Zealanders. (Mason/R/W3).

Mason recalled the "difficulties" caused by his Chinese name during his academic sojourn. In his mind, there was no meaningful social or cultural correlation between his national identity and his Chinese name, and thus "[i]t was somewhat laughable and strange introducing yourself with this name that you have no affiliation with" (Mason/R/W3). In practice, it may be understandable that he was not able to negotiate this new membership—a new "sense of self", in other words (Norton, 2013, p. 45, p. 45)—within the community and culture he has been affiliated with over a short period of time (only three weeks). Hence, this artificial connection created by his Chinese teacher seemed to generate resistance towards Chinese language learning. In this regard, Mason's foreigner identification to some extent weakened his desire and commitment to make more efforts to learn Chinese in the classroom.

Grace was in her fifties and a university staff member. While she had rich teaching experience in New Zealand, she found it extremely hard to adapt to her Chinese teacher's instructional style during study abroad.

[9] The teacher leads the lessons with little feedback from the students. Therefore, adjusting to a different way of learning is a challenge in itself. … She indicates a page number and we start repeating the new vocabulary after her, or she would start teaching a language point on the whiteboard. It did make me wonder how I was going to cope with this method of teaching and learning which differs so much with that of our Western style classrooms. The students say very little, little is asked by the teacher, and we just listen. (Grace/R/W3).

As a New Zealand teacher and also a Chinese language learner, Grace had been used to inquiry-based learning, which considers learners as "active participants in the learning process" (Simons, 1993, p. 294–295) and emphasizes interactive and cooperative communication strategies as well as critical thinking and practical application (Holmes, 2006). However, Grace's Chinese learning experiences during study abroad were largely restricted to the input registers of repeating and listening, and opportunities for teacher-student interaction were rare in the classroom. At the same time, given that she identified herself as a Chinese language user, Grace expected to improve her daily communication ability, rather than only sitting in the classroom and learning vocabulary in the textbook. This unmet expectation further increased tensions between her ideal learning mode and the teachers' practical instructional practices. Also, the pedagogical mismatch or ambivalence reduced her participation in the classroom setting, and thus undermined the tangible connection between her desire and the language practice community. In essence, her resistance to learning in the four walls of the classroom illustrated her discomfort with being positioned as a conventional learner by the pedagogical style based on Confucian principles.

In addition, most of the participants who identified themselves as Chinese language users felt unfavorably positioned by the content of the Chinese courses, and therefore resisted the content to some extent. While they desired to improve their daily communication skills in order to be able to function in a Chinese-medium context, the classroom courses mainly positioned them as traditional Chinese language learners, with a focus on vocabulary, sentence patterns, and grammatical points. Olivia explicitly expressed this contradiction.

[10] After communicating with the locals, I feel like it is different to class because in class it is not very conversational. Outside of campus, I am able to use my speaking in a real life situation. … Class is restricting in that aspect. (Olivia/R/ W3)

Apart from occasional uses of Chinese in classroom settings, Olivia and many other participants found no opportunities or resources to practice their spoken Chinese. This ambivalence led to her daily communicative practices socializing with others outside the classroom. Like Olivia, other participants who emphasized their Chinese language user identity (e.g., Isabella, Ava, Teddy) often sought out practice opportunities with locals outside the classroom to promote their oral Chinese in daily scenarios.

5. Discussion

Using the lens of identity, the present study examined a group of New Zealand students' strategic efforts related to Chinese language learning during a period of study abroad in China. Overall, the findings presented above illustrate how the participants' strategic efforts and sometimes their resistance towards Chinese language learning were closely intertwined with their present and future identity imaginations, shaped by the Chinese educational context and mediated by various social agents including Chinese teachers and local Chinese interlocutors. This result echoes the findings of previous studies (e.g., Gao, 2018; Hajar, 2017; Kinginger, 2013), which consistently demonstrated the importance of interpreting strategic language learning, including strategic efforts and resistance, through the lens of identities. Beyond generally indicating the participants' strategic language learning, this research further reveals the reasons why the participants used different strategic learning efforts to enhance their Chinese proficiency, including literacy-oriented and interaction-oriented strategic efforts. Their strategic language learning efforts were dynamic and contextualized across different settings, and were in close relation to their different learning purposes and shifting identity imaginations.

In terms of the association between the participants' different identities and strategic language learning efforts, this research found that their second language identity, including "Chinese language learner" and "Chinese language user", played a crucial role in shaping their strategic learning efforts. This is in line with Benson et al.'s (2012) research. In particular, the participants' literacy-oriented strategic efforts were closely linked to their commitment to become a Chinese language learner in the classroom setting, whereas the interaction-oriented strategic efforts were intimately connected with their desire to function as a user outside the classroom context. Also, their Chinese learning strategic efforts were influenced by the quantity and quality of the language resources provided by the Chinese language program and support from influential social agents, principally Chinese teachers. However, in practice, as Chinese language learners, they were almost unable to gain access to adequate support from teachers or the program organizers to enhance their linguistic knowledge, given the issues regarding pedagogical style, teaching pace, and course content.

Consequently, there were always a variety of tensions between their learning goals and the teachers' pedagogical practices. As Chinese language users, the resources they could use were typically informal and fragmented, and could not effectively facilitate their interaction ability. In this regard, there is a pressing need for stakeholders in Chinese language programs to examine their course or curriculum design in order to combine linguistic knowledge and pragmatic competence. The seamless integration of instructional resources and opportunities in and outside the classroom needs to be a priority of study abroad programs. Researchers and teachers also need to explore more bespoke courses/curriculums for study abroad students learning Chinese (Gong, Hu, & Lai, 2018). For instance, students may draw on Chinese language corner/club activities to connect their language learning experiences in the classroom with language use outside the classroom. Also, we need more studies to continue addressing the complexity of learner identity in the study abroad context, especially in China.

The finding regarding the participants' future identity imaginations is in accordance with Gao et al. (2008) and Diao (2017). This played a critical role in shaping the participants' strategic efforts to Chinese language proficiency in and outside the classroom. Teachers should encourage students to take opportunities to use the Chinese language in real situations such as initiating conversations with local people, which will help them to achieve membership access to their desired community. In addition, this research has showed the pressing need to continue examining international students' Chinese language learning through the lens of identity.

In agreement with Block (2007) and Kinginger (2008), this research indicates that the participants tended to resist current classroom practices when they felt they were being assigned undesirable identities by the Chinese teachers' pedagogical style and the course content. According to McKinney and van Pletzen (2004), although the students' resistance reflected instructional problems, it also provided an impetus for teachers and other educational stakeholders to consider complex issues in language education. In this sense, Chinese language teachers should consider refining their current pedagogical practices, including instructional strategies, communication modes, and curriculum material use (Gong, Ma, et al., 2020; Wang, 2019; Zheng, Lu, & Ren, 2020). The teachers need to realize the central role of learner identity in Chinese language education, and pay more attention to international students' sociocultural backgrounds. At the same time, it is necessary for researchers to continue investigating students' resistance in classrooms teaching Chinese as an additional language, which is an emerging issue in the field of Chinese education research.

6. Conclusion

The present study has examined the connection between the identities of fifteen New Zealand students and their strategic Chinese language learning during study abroad in a Chinese university. Analysis of data from reflective journals, group interviews, and online communication suggested that international students' present and future identity imaginations shaped their strategic language learning efforts across different educational settings, including literacy-oriented strategic efforts in the classroom and interaction-oriented strategic efforts outside the classroom. At the same time, they tended to resist classroom practices when they perceived that unfavorable identities were being imposed up on them by teachers' pedagogical practices, such as instructional styles or course content (Zhang, Thomas, & Qin, 2019).

It should be noted that this inquiry only involved New Zealand students, and any generalization of the results to all international students in China or other language learning settings should be undertaken with caution. This research was based on reflective journals, interviews, and online communication during a six-week academic sojourn. It would be helpful to conduct longitudinal studies of greater duration in order to map the transformation or reconstruction of learners' identities, and interactions with their Chinese language learning efforts over time. Even though the reflective journal entries were collected weekly and various strategic efforts were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings, what was reported might be different from what was enacted in actual scenarios. Also, our position as Chinese researchers meant that to some extent our data may reflect the predispositions of a Chinese research tradition and our understanding of learner identity, especially some aspects in relation to the Chinese educational system.

Despite these limitations, however, we believe that the findings of the present study demonstrate the significance of understanding learner identity in the educational context of Chinese as an additional language. At the same time, this research also calls for more attention to students' identity and resistance in the Chinese classroom, and may help Chinese teachers to refine their pedagogical practices for international students (Gong, Gao, et al., 2020; Griffiths, 2020).

Author statement

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