

Master's Degree  
in  
Scienze del Linguaggio

Final Thesis

**Italian Learning in a Study Abroad  
Context**

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Matriculation number

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**Academic Year**

2019/2020



*Embrace the complexity.*

## Abstract

Nowadays, language teaching and learning is greatly characterized by the influence of globalization which has also increased the international mobility of language learners. In-country language learning, namely language learning within the country where this language is spoken by local communities, is normally associated with positive learning outcomes. However, studies have shown that it might not be the whole story. Different degrees of learners' language development or changes in learning beliefs indicate that successful language acquisition in study-abroad (SA) context is based on various conditions, for instance, how language learners avail themselves of the language learning resources in such learning context. What learners need to face is not merely studying language itself, but also learning independently outside the classroom and integrating themselves to the new living and learning environment.

The dissertation seeks to enrich the understanding the efficacy of SA learning context by investigating the learning experience of Chinese-speaking learners of Italian after their stay in Italy. The data collected from 18 Chinese students suggests that they generally lacked diverse approaches for enhancing out-of-class language exposure, which resulted in some of the students' disappointment towards their SA learning experience. These findings provide useful references not only for future work in the related area, but for actual practices regarding Italian teaching and the design of SA programs.

La glottodidattica di oggi è fortemente caratterizzata dall'influenza della globalizzazione. Tale fenomeno rende possibile la mobilità internazionale degli studenti di lingua da diversi background culturali e formativi. Sebbene sia facile associare l'idea di studiare una lingua straniera all'estero con il successo dell'acquisizione linguistica, la verità potrebbe essere più complicata di quanto appaia: vi sono infatti numerose variabili che includono l'approccio dello studente all'offerta

didattica in tale contesto formativo, la preparazione linguistica antecedente al soggiorno in Italia, la capacità di integrarsi nella società destinataria, ecc.

L'autore porta avanti la discussione sull'efficacia dei progetti di lingua all'estero già presenti nella letteratura di SLA, indagando lo studio dell'italiano come L2 degli studenti cinesi durante la loro esperienza di studio della lingua italiana in Italia e cerca di fornire un quadro più completo possibile della loro difficoltà di imparare l'italiano come L2 in Italia. I dati raccolti da 18 studenti cinesi dimostrano che generalmente la mancanza di diversità per quanto riguarda l'accesso all'esposizione linguistica al di fuori della classe è prevalente. Una delle principali conseguenze è l'insoddisfazione dell'esperienza di studio in Italia. Queste scoperte fungono da riferimenti utili non solo per i futuri studi nell'ambito ma anche nella didattica pratica dell'italiano e della progettazione dei programmi overseas.

**Key words:** study abroad, Italian learning, Chinese SA students, language exposure

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my gratitude to all of the professors who have enlightened and encouraged me during my graduate study at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, in particular, my dissertation supervisor and assistant supervisor: Professor Carmel Mary Coonan and Dr. Marcella Menegale. Appreciation goes to my undergraduate professor of Italian at Shanghai International Studies University -- Wang Jianquan, who have helped me during the data collection procedure, and to my dear friend Yihang for giving constructive advice for the writing of my dissertation.

A loving thanks goes to Alessio for helping me polishing the abstract in Italian and encouraging me during this special time of my life.

Lastly, I offer my endless gratitude to my parents who have been unconditionally loving me and supporting me for every choice I made to pursue my dream.

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## Introduction

With the unstoppable tide of internationalization of education, the growing influx of Chinese students in the tertiary-level institutions in Western countries has been witnessed for decades. Such tendency has occurred also in Italy especially since both China and Italy have determined to take a step forward to deepen their cooperative bilateral relationship by reaching an agreement that was in favor of the mobility of Chinese students towards Italy. In 2006 , a pre-university language program, “Marco Polo” program whose aim was to facilitate Chinese prospective students’ visa application and Italian learning, was carried out. To date, other programs similar to the Marco Polo programs provide Chinese students with multiple access to pursue their study in Italy. The incentive to recruit more Chinese students in Italian higher education system has certainly achieved positive results. According to the latest data from the Institute for Statistics of UNESCO (2019), Chinese students made up the biggest part of international students in Italy. It’s predictable that this number will keep growing in the near future since studying abroad is encouraged also by Chinese government -- in recent years, the Ministry of Education of China initiated a major project for talent development in which the significant role of promoting non-English languages SA program and developing a more comprehensive coverage of talents of as more foreign languages as possible (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The increasing demands for overseas study is accompanied with the growing needs of foreign language teaching not only in students’ home country, but directly in their destination countries of overseas study. In-country language study is believed to be efficient in that the abundance of authentic language input and higher possibility to practice target languages are advantageous for language acquisition. For this reason, when learners study language abroad, it is naturally assumed that they would have endless access to natural language input in this learning context. However, language learning in study abroad (SA) contexts is influenced by numerous variables

concerning learners' previous language learning experience, personalities, motivations, conditions of SA programs, etc. Thus the learning outcomes may vary greatly vis à vis learners' education backgrounds and SA programs. In fact, SA research regarding the topic of language proficiency growth within a certain period of time has shown that the widely accepted idea of positive language improvement by public was so exaggerated that probably it was more a myth than a truth (DeKeyser, 2010).

In the literature of SA research, several attempts have been made to figure out the efficacy SA learning on certain linguistic skills. Generally speaking, even though language learning in SA contexts seems to yield better results than other contexts of learning, it's doubtless that the positive findings from each single study were normally limited within one or a few aspects of language development. Researchers' focuses have extended from the basic linguistic competences into a broader cross-disciplinary scope, for instance, learners' sociolinguistic skills, cognitive and metacognitive abilities. The growing pluralism of SA research renders the generalization of the discussion on the efficiency of in-country language learning even more difficult and perhaps, unnecessary. Besides, due to the diversity of research tools and inherent differences among the investigated subjects and SA programs, whether the SA experience benefits language acquisition or not is still puzzling, inconclusive or even controversial.

Debate concerning the limitations of SA learning contexts is also frequently taking place in the literature. Various evidence has revealed that an overall improvement of linguistic abilities was not necessarily the corollary at the end of a period of sojourn in destination countries. As language acquisition in SA contexts is conditioned by several factors such as learners' language use outside the classroom and their perceptions towards language learning, which are out of the control of language instructors and program designers.

Due to the increasingly frequent mobility of international students with the purpose of language learning, SA research has gradually become an important area in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA). The primary concern of SA studies

is the efficacy of in-country language learning. At the initial stage of development, SA research was mainly concentrated on English learning/teaching and was mostly conducted among Western learners. As time develops, researchers started to diversify their studies in terms of the focus of research area and began to reach out to more language learners whose cultural backgrounds were different from those of mainstream Western subjects. Especially in recent years, there has been an increasing interest in investigating Chinese-speaking learners' language learning process in SA contexts. Yet, language studies that have involved Chinese participants were respectively insufficient for completing the whole picture of their second language (L2) learning in study-abroad contexts. Obviously, there is still a huge gap to plug in our understandings on issues regarding Chinese SA learners' non-English language learning.

Hence, this dissertation seeks to remedy the lacuna in the participation of Chinese-speaking learners of Italian in the SA literature, focusing on the investigation of their SA learning experience in Italy. Firstly, based on the existing theories and studies in the SA literature, this dissertation will systematically reviews the previous data and construct a theoretical framework that supports the further investigation on this specific issue. Next, a small-scale research will be carried out in the hope of investigating the extent to which the Chinese learners are exposed to the SA context and how does the SA learning experience affect their thoughts about Italian and Italian learning. This research aims to provide an opportunity to advance the understanding of Chinese students' learning experience in Italy from their perspectives. Data for this research will be collected through social networks, using an online questionnaire developed from the study of Tragant (2012). Although due to practical constraints, this dissertation cannot provide a comprehensive review of the issues regarding Chinese learners of Italian present on the territory of Italy, constructive implications for future pedagogic practices can be withdrawn from the findings of the research analysis.

The choice of the topic and research objectives is also related to author's personal interest and experience of Italian learning and teaching in various contexts.

Previously, the author of was graduated from the MA program in Italian language in China and used to attend Italian courses in Italy as an exchange student. In 2020, the author had the privilege of assisting some Italian language instructors with their Italian teaching at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. In other words, her main responsibility was to giving a two-hour lesson per week to three classes of international students who took part in different Italian language programs during that time. Most of the students came from China. The author had observed several phenomena from the Chiense-speaking students that were also recorded in the SA literature, among which the most prominent peculiarity of was the degree to which they were able to exploit the L2 resources available within the SA learning context. After talking with both professors and some of the Chinese students and having classes with these students, a rudiment of this dissertation has come up.

This dissertation has been divided into five parts. The first chapter begins with the construction of the theoretical framework by reviewing previous theories and studies in the literature. Firstly, the author will provide the definition of a few important terminologies in the domain of SA research, followed by a brief introduction into the development of this research area and some previous studies on Chinese-speaking learners. Secondly, the discussion will be concentrated on the controversy surrounding the efficacy of language learning in SA contexts. In other words, the impacts of SA learning on language growth and learners' perspectives, which is one of the main focus in the SA literature, will be elaborated in the second section of the first chapter. Lastly, based on the existing research, the author will deal with the three major variables that influence the language acquisition in SA contexts.

After laying out the theoretical dimensions of the SA research, the second chapter will gives a brief overview of the actualities of Italian learning from the point of view of Chinese-speaking learners, including discussions on L2 learning difficulty for the Chinese learners of Italian, Italian language education in China and existing Italian SA programs for Chinese students. Combining with the previous literature review, the last section of this chapter will be concentrated on the potential challenges

that most of the Chinese students may have to face along the path of Italian learning in both AH and SA learning contexts.

The third chapter is concerned with the design of the qualitative research which will be carried out in order to further investigate the relating issues of Chinese learners' SA experience in Italy. Research materials, participants, methodologies and data collection procedure will be present in this part. The data analysis, research results and final discussions about the research will be organized in the next chapter. The final discussions are consist of a summary of the findings and the implications of the research results for future work and the inevitable limitations of the research.

The final chapter draws upon the entire dissertation, reviewing the existing theories, previous research, practical dilemma of the existing SA programs discussed at the first few chapters of the dissertation and uniting the findings of the specific research carried out during the writing of current dissertation. Finally, reflections on the pros and cons of the dissertation and implications for further research will be provided.

## **Chap 1 Theoretical framework**

### **1.1 Dynamics in the study-abroad literature**

The initial paragraph will delve into the study abroad (SA) literature, by firstly defining basic concepts and research scopes, followed by a brief presentation of the history of SA studies in the last few decades. Given that the main focus of this dissertation is Italian as L2 for Chinese learners, the third section will select a few specific studies conducted with Chinese-speaking subjects.

#### **1.1.1 FL, L2 and SA**

First and foremost, before entering into the discussion about non-primary language learning or teaching, it's necessary to make a distinction between two important terminologies: the Second Language (L2) and the Foreign Language (FL). If a non-primary language is learned in reference to a speech community outside the actual context where the learning takes place, it can be defined as a FL (Berns, 1990). On the contrary, an in-country learning which happens exactly where the target language (TL) is spoken by local community, it falls into the category of L2. Taking Chinese-speaking learner as example, Italian is a FL when he/she studies the Italian language in China. When the learning context switches to Italy, Italian becomes a L2 for him/her.

When it comes to research area, it's necessary to draw a distinction between L2 and FL when one's research probes into social contexts, psycholinguistic and psychosocial processes and language learning products (VanPatten & Lee, 1990). Clearly, study-abroad (SA) researches that were born specifically under the umbrella of SLA investigate language learning and teaching issues occurred in the context where research subjects' TL and the spoken language of their destined country coincide. What follows is that learning conditions and results in this kind of context usually differentiate from the most common scenario of language learning in which

TL is learned in home country -- the at-home (AH) setting which is normally characterized by the scarcity of authentic language input.

SA context offers learners a huge amount of opportunities to learn and practice target languages that AH context cannot equate with. It seems to be a common sense that the richness of authentic language resources is one of the determining factors that can decide language learning outcomes. Thus, when learners study language abroad, it is naturally assumed that they would have abundant access to authentic language input in this learning environment. Apart from the formal language classroom instruction offered by common SA programs, learners will be immersed in a world of the L2 as soon as they step out of the classroom. Language input is everywhere: from overheard casual chitchats on the street to interaction with native interlocutors, from fragmented words and phrases at supermarkets to articles on various websites or newspapers. Even the most timid and passive learner is expected to receive a higher level of exposure under these circumstances than staying in their home country. The higher accessibility to native speakers is crucial to second language acquisition in that it greatly enhances learner's possibility to learn and practice the L2 outside of the classroom. In addition, studying abroad helps learner to integrate into the TL community and target culture (TC) by observing and accommodating to native speakers' sociolinguistic behaviour and norms (Regan, 1998). However, the quantity of natural language input is not the one and only variable that influences L2 learning results. The way how learners react to the different learning environment, the formal L2 instruction and many other factors synchronously influence the outcomes of language learning and for this reason, studies of language teaching or learning have started to branch out into a more context-specific domain.

### 1.1.2 SA research history at a glance

Before the Millennium, SA studies were mostly focused on discussing the efficacy of SA programs by measuring learner's linguistic skills (Collentine, 2009). It's generally recognized that SA context yields better results in second language learning because

of the greater possibility to interact with native TL speakers. However, learners may be overwhelmed by several unfamiliar traits of the language input: the amount, delivery rate, and language complexity (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). “The learner plunged into a new social and linguistic environment is obliged to communicate and yet may not have all the necessary means at his disposal to do so... The learner thus must learn and communicate simultaneously.” (Regan, 1998:64). For decades, researchers have been striving for measuring the efficacy of language learning that occurs in SA context. Although the general attitude towards learning languages within the authentic language environment was positive, it’s inevitable to find out that within one single study only a limited quantity of language or sociolinguistic competences, rather than the overall efficacy of SA learning, could be examined. It seems inappropriate to define whether a SA program or learning L2 in SA context were efficient or not by trying to capture changes of only a few linguistic aspects. Investigating the dynamics of interactions between learner and context may have more realistic significance than valuing the performance of different contexts (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Some research measurements (e.g., discrete-point tests) that were normally adopted to testify learners’ global grammatical abilities were also criticized for being far from precise in order to generalize the marginal gains obtained at the end of a SA experience (Colletine, 2004). There’s no doubt that the efficacy of in-country L2 learning will remain as a perennial subject of interest in the foreseeable future.

As time develops, SA researches get in touch with more non-Euroamerican learners, especially those from Asia, since the presence of a great body of Asian students has been witnessed in North America, South Pacific and Europe. The growing number of Asian students has been witnessed since the beginning of the 1990s. During this time, Asian students in the Western world have mostly come from Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan.

Tanaka and Ellis’ study (2003) provides valuable data on proficiency gains of 166 adult Japanese students during a 15-week SA program in the United States. Besides the moderate TOEFL point gain in general, grammatical proficiency was



reported to be greater than performance in communicative sections. They attributed it to homogeneous group composition and less English communication outside the language classroom. These students studied and lived together with Japanese fellows just as if they were in Japan. Although these learners' belief about language learning was greatly improved at the end of the program, it had no relationship with proficiency development. The longitudinal study of Code and Anderson (2001) on 35 Japanese high-school students of English reported great improvement of pragmatic competence after spending ten months studying English in Canada and New Zealand. Linguistic resources in SA contexts provided more pragmatic forms and norms so that learners could learn and practice. Post-tests showed that the use of direct requests was drastically reduced, which is an interesting indicator of the positive impact of SA learning contexts on Japanese speakers as they tend to exaggerate their directness, or more precisely, transfer their habits of using direct forms used in L1 to L2 when they make requests in L2.

As research subjects being gradually diversified, specialized terms appeared and arguments followed up. Such as the 'Asian Learner' (AL), the 'Chinese Learner' (CL) and the 'Confucian-heritage culture learner' (CHCL). A common stereotypical perception towards CHCLs is that they tend to be inactive and reticent at language classroom. It's the challenging conflict between Western language teachers' mission to interact with learners and East Asian learners' passivity, low classroom involvement and reticence that led the Gordian knot in teaching area to an over-generalization on the entire group of learners with different personalities, learning motivations, language learning experiences, diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. In Shao and Gao's (2016) review on 10 articles concerning East Asian students' reticence and willingness to communicate (WTC), they pointed out that explanations to language learners behaviour are beyond being simply of East Asian ethnicity --- learners' language proficiency, Western teachers' methodology, cultural and emotional teacher-student relations could be the underlying situation-specific factors. Categorizing these learners' behaviour and attributing it to cultural background is not only problematic but also 'old-fashioned', as in the 1970s and

1980s the notion of cultural values such as individualism and collectivism were widely accepted as determinant of L2 learning issues. The appropriate attitude for teachers and researchers to tackle with East Asian students' learning issue is to firstly, not to neglect the impact produced by cultural factors; secondly, to combine them with other individual, situational, social and historical conditions. Furthermore, it's worth reflecting whether learner's reticence, WTC and other behaviours that have signs of passivity at language classroom should be always interpreted as negative ways of language learning. Liu & Jackson (2008) surveyed 547 Chinese students of English as FL and found that their unwillingness to participate in communications is significantly positively correlated with their language anxiety, self-rated language proficiency and little access to English in China in their daily lives. One of the suggested solutions was to encourage students to gain more exposure and practice using English both in and out of the classroom.

About twenty years later, the composition of Asian students abroad was reshuffled by the participation of Chinese students which recently has been receiving growing research attention from the education circle. Language difficulties were reported with no exception to be the major challenge faced by Chinese students overseas (Henze & Zhu, 2012). Further discussion will be continued in detail in the following section.

### 1.1.3 Previous research on Chinese-speaking learners

Although there is a considerable body of literature on issues regarding Chinese students in study abroad context (Yang et al., 2011; Li & Campbell, 2008; Gu & Maley, 2008), relatively few published studies concentrate on language learning or teaching. Fang et al. (2016) interviewed 14 Chinese students who enrolled in a two-year collaborative Master program of University of British Columbia, Canada and found that, especially on the arrival, students expressed their willingness to participate in the classes but had difficulties understanding and communicating in English due to reasons such as lack of confidence in their command of English and

need for long pauses to process linguistic information before answering instructors' questions. The result was in line with a previous analysis in which more than half of the Chinese-speaking participants (58.3%) reported that the dilemma of language competence was the biggest factor that challenged the quality of the joint-degree program (Gao et al., 2011). In a study by Gu & Maley (2008) on 163 Chinese university students in UK, they used the term "learning shock" to describe unpleasant psychological, cognitive and affective struggles experienced by foreign students. The learning shock stems largely from insufficient language competences and may lead to series of learning problems in the future, for instance, lack of involvement in class discussions.

Evidently, the presence of a language barrier is almost a universal problem among Chinese learners overseas and it is one of the most challenging factors that affect Chinese learners' general perceptions towards pursuing study abroad and the ultimate academic outcomes as well. After recognizing the gravity of the issue of language difficulty, researchers and language educators commenced further investigation on different aspects of L2 improvement, change of learning strategies or motivation that Chinese students experienced during the SA periods.

A comparative study by Wu & Zhang (2017) suggested that 1.5 years of exposure to English had a significantly positive influence on Chinese students' writing perceptions and performance. The SA group demonstrated stronger motivations and more expected strengths in different English skills than the at-home group. In terms of writing performance, these SA students outperformed their counterparts in informal types of writing, i.e., letter writing. Thus, the immersion in target language offered students more chances for practice and in this way, at the end of the SA period, specific linguistic progress accrued.

Gao (2006) re-interpreted his previous study on changes of 14 Chinese learners' English learning strategies from a socio-cultural theoretical perspective and were able to illustrate how a SA context stimulated changes in one's choices of learning strategies. Before these learners started their foundation programs or postgraduate programs in British universities, they studied English as foreign language in mainland

China and therefore, used language learning strategies that were profoundly shaped by the typical FL learning culture and language teaching style of the home country. Generally speaking, these learners viewed English as a tool for achieving personal academic or professional goals. This aspect somewhat underwent changes during their sojourn in Britain when learners had no more need to prepare for standardized language exams. Furthermore, the ubiquitous L2 input and communicative opportunities encouraged learners to view English-speakers as supportive agents rather than language teachers, learning experts, friends or parents as it was in China. All learners had access to built friendship with native speakers. A few of them reported in the interview that they actively sought interaction with native speakers or had English-speaking cohabitants. On the one hand, learners tended to gain new linguistic knowledge, motivations, beliefs and strategies in accordance with new contextual needs. On the other hand, impacts of past English learning experience in their home country had left trace on SA learning --- both postgraduate and foundation informants expressed the need for more formal language instruction support for learning language itself and learning how to study English in the new context, as they were dependent on teacher-centered language teaching style and learning assessment (exams or language proficiency tests) in China. Gao's re-interpretation provided credible proof on Chinese university students' strategy use from a comparative and sociocultural point of view. Conclusions draw from this study offered a useful tool for researchers and had referential value for language instructors to obtain a better understanding on what consequences could moving abroad and studying abroad bring about on students from mainland China.

Change of learning context not only affects Chinese learners' learning strategies, but also their motivations. Gao's (2008) longitudinal study on several mainland Chinese undergraduate students' learning motivation before and after their university life in Hong Kong demonstrated the dynamics of language learning within different learning contexts and their profound impact on students' internal thoughts toward English learning. Self-determined motivational discourses were almost absent among these high achievers of English before these skills came into handy for reasons

beyond a mere educational or societal obligation in the new learning context. It was reported that participants later internalized the previous instrumental motivation and realized new values of self-assertion and identity fulfillment during their learning process in Hong Kong. Gao also highlighted the important role that supportive social networks could play on promoting learners' intrinsic motivation for ongoing English learning and cultural exploration in an unfamiliar learning environment. A few participants pointed out that attending English-medium courses that were related to English learning actually contributed to linguistic improvement in a very limited way, they had to spend extra time on honing language skills in their spare time, which hence rendered interaction in TL and the creation of sustained social networks extremely effective and positive on individual's language development.

The issue of Chinese-speaking learners' L2 acquisition can also be observed through the lenses of immigration studies. In a longitudinal study of Chinese-speaking immigrants, Jia & Aaronson (2003) compared ten children and adolescent participants' L1/L2 (Chinese/English) use and proficiency in the course of three years in the host country. They distinguished a series of external variables that formed and changed each individual's language environment: arrival age, social abilities, language preference of participants and their peers, etc. Older arrivals mostly socialized with peers who shared same cultural and linguistic background with them. As for language environment, older arrivals read and listened to English primarily for academic purposes and produced L2 output in limited situations from year to year. These differences altogether fostered the dominance of L2 among younger participants and the maintenance of L1 among older ones. Interesting findings and standpoints from research on immigrants' language acquisition help to draw a clearer picture of L2 acquisition happening in situations that maybe are similar to SA settings. The way in which cognitive, social and cultural variables formed language preferences of immigrants, namely, non-native learners, provides vivid examples on how L2 environments function.

Studies on Chinese-speaking learners learning languages other than English are even more rare. Unlike English, Japanese, Korean or European languages are defined

as “minor foreign language” whose courses are usually not mandatory during 9-year compulsory education. Therefore, the learner base of these languages is relatively smaller and opportunities to get access to relevant linguistic resources are fewer with respect to English. Liu (2018) studied the issue of German language anxiety of 138 at-home learners based in Beijing and 91 study-abroad learners in Germany. Both groups reported that listening was the greatest source of language anxiety because of language deficiency and the lack of L2 practice. Compared with the AH group, students who learned German abroad felt more confident at their speaking ability but worried more about classroom performance. About one third of SA participants attributed their speaking anxiety to the lack of language environment for practicing. It’s not surprising that learners might self-isolate from most of the daily interactions with native speakers and/or have preference in being in touch with primarily co-nationals. Except the common social habits that both immigrants and SA learners demonstrated above, Liu also mentioned about the convenience of mature telecommunications technology that might bolster the maintenance of SA group’s old social networks by connecting the geographic gap between one’s home country and host country, which might indirectly affect the psychological need and interest for constructing a new one with German-speaking peoples. The finding was consistent with a qualitative study of Mikal, Yang and Lewis (2015) in which 18 Chinese graduate or undergraduate students were interviewed for their internet use during their stay in the United States. It was found that the internet could be a double-edge sword. On one side, these Chinese students often had to face independently challenges from academic pressure, language and culture barriers, day-to-day chores abroad and through internet, they gained not only access to useful informational support but also had a channel to create new co-national supporting networks, though it was reported to be limited. On the other side, Chinese students in this study preferred using internet to cement old or new relationships with members from the Chinese community, rather than seeking and building up friendship with the Americans. All 18 subjects reported that the majority of their peers and closest friends was of Chinese nationality. Over half said that their entire circle of friends consisted of only Chinese. Although the

causes of the retreat to insular social networks resided in aspects of culture, languages, personalities, etc, these “Chinatown-like” surroundings undoubtedly jeopardized linguistic and intercultural development which were the paramount objective for their decision to study in the United States.

To wrap up, issues like lack of L2 proficiency and low willingness of interaction inside/outside language classrooms discussed above are not exclusive to Chinese-speaking learners. Yet, language studies that involve Chinese SA participants are still too scanty to complete the entire picture of L2 learning in study abroad contexts. It’s possible that conclusions drawn by SA studies with subjects who have Chinese as L1 could be different from those done with European-language-speaking participants (Milton & Meara, 1995). Thus, researches that had been done with mainstream Western subjects are expected to diversify on participants’ backgrounds.

## 1.2 Is SA efficient?

SA studies often focus on measuring growth in specific linguistic skills or specific aspects of one skill: learners’ overall oral proficiency, development of grammatical knowledge and sociolinguistic skills, etc (Mora, 2008; Serrano et al., 2011). To date, whether study abroad experience benefits language improvement or not is still puzzling, inconclusive or even controversial: results from different studies vary greatly vis à vis participants’ background and programs’ conditions (Díaz-Campos, 2004; Wu & Zhang, 2017). The primary mission here is to figure out how existing studies measured SA learning outcomes and to understand the implications for future studies. After that, the discussion will concentrate on growth of certain language aspects that have been partly proved by SA literature and changes of learners’ perspectives as a result of in-country study.

### 1.2.1 Measuring SA efficacy

A direct way to identify whether there has been any improvement in the SA context is either to compare language-related outcomes with at-home (AH) learning context, or examine language performance at different points in time during the study abroad. Unfortunately, the lack of a multitude of comparative studies entails contradiction and sometimes renders even more complicated a systematic understanding of the pros and cons of the two learning contexts. In practice, conditions that need to be set up for comparisons between two groups are not easy to meet and because of this, a simple pre- and post-test research methodology is more commonly adopted (Milton & Meara, 1995). Besides, Housen et al. (2011) argue that the diversity of research methodologies adopted by empirical studies also makes it hard to generalize the effects of SA context on language development.

Dichotomizing learning contexts as at-home setting and study-abroad setting is unequivocally an oversimplification of the dynamics existing within each investigated learning program. Growing calls for attention on comparative studies and introduction of appropriate research methods enable researchers of this century to gradually untangle the complexity of SA-AH acquisition, or at least, classify aspects should be tested in order to better generalize research results (Collentine, 2009).

Generally speaking, a SA context tends to enhance learner's productive abilities, especially oral proficiency, while AH-FL programs help learners in absorbing grammatical structures and rules of the target language. It seems that the SA and AH environments produce language acquisition benefits that are different but complementary. Therefore, from a program designer's point of view, it would be more ideal to let learners have access to both programs, or to be more specific, first AH then SA programs, as in common practice.

Generalizing the efficacy in a few words seems imprecise and impractical because language learning involves different facets that cannot be examined all at once. It's a standard practice for SLA scholars to break this argument down into pieces, then carry out corresponding quantitative and/or qualitative studies that



provide necessary data regarding the chosen issue. For instance, multiple empirical researches have explored the SA efficacy on various aspects: oral fluency, phonological acquisition, reading competence, sociolinguistic skills, strategy use, learner's perspectives on language learning, etc (Amuzie & Winke, 2009). As a branch of SLA research, the majority of SA studies have been highly product-oriented and have focused on measurable items of students' language acquisition abroad, for example, language proficiency and linguistic knowledge. Extensive quantitative research has not yet and cannot adequately convey the personal growth and experience (Pellegrino, 1998). Nevertheless, no evidence from empirical studies has proved the long-held assumptions that the SA context is superior to other learning contexts for all levels of L2 development or in all types of language skills (Collentine & Freed, 2004).

SA programs were also believed to positively influence non-native speakers more as an experiential learning of target language (TL) and target culture (TC) than a mere focus-on-form language instruction. In other words, a SA learning experience is normally characterized by the social environment that it offers to language learning for practicing and learning the TL in a naturalistic context, while the at-home context focuses more on in-class activities, homework, quizzes, etc (O'Donnell, 2005). Therefore, studying abroad should be viewed as a comprehensive experience for learners that covers linguistic competences improvement, broadening of individual horizons, personal growth, change of perspectives of target language, target culture and language learning, and so on. Moreover, the complexity of a SA context, already investigated from various theoretical and methodological perspectives, is caused by all aspects and can impact not only linguistic gains but also language-related psychological, cognitive and cultural domains (Tragant, 2012). It is advisable that researchers focus on learners' thoughts on the process of learning language abroad in order to draw a more complete picture of how SA experience can influence language acquisition.

### 1.2.2 major aspects of L2 improvement

Over time, studies that examined growth in specific aspects of language competence obtained in study abroad programs have generally confirmed its efficacy on language acquisition (Kinginger, 2008). A great body of research suggests that learners who have L2 learning experience abroad tend to gain substantial oral skills (Mora, 2008). Pre- and post-test studies often found SA context more advantageous for development of oral fluency and lexical diversity than traditional at-home courses with distributed hours of language study per week, i.e., 10h/week over two months of total instruction duration (Housen et al., 2011; Serrano et al., 2011). Higher oral fluency, lexical diversity and accuracy are found to be associated with the informal contact with native speakers and the time immersed in an input-rich SA environment might enable learners to reach higher fluency (Muñoz, 2014). The residence abroad avails holistic L2 proficiency development “along the aural-oral continuum” (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011:163). Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau’s study on Catalan/Spanish bilingual students’ oral and written gains after a three-month ERASMUS exchange in English-speaking countries revealed significant improvement in both skills and, more precisely, more linguistic development was captured in oral productions. Frequent interaction with native speakers, academic practices in target language, growth in strong motivation and self-awareness towards independent language learning benefited these participants in fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity and increased use of formulaic language in oral or written performance.

The richness of available communication opportunities in study-abroad contexts has the potential to enhance learners’ communicative ability and oral fluency, but appear to be less helpful in terms of improving knowledge of L2 grammar forms which is most possibly gained within at-home context (O’Donnell, 2005). Lennon (1990) conducted a six-month longitudinal study with four German advanced adult learners of English to test language development during their SA period in England and didn’t find a steady growth of speech speed. Instead, improvement on syntactic complexity (i.e., longer and more complex T-Units) and error reduction was reported.

It seems that advanced learners' grammar competence growth has somehow "fossilized", therefore contacts with native speakers benefit them only in improving "surface fluency". Flege and Liu's (2011) study that investigated the correlation between non-student immigrants' L2 development and their length of residence discovered the same tendency of progressively losing grammatical judgement as the time spent abroad grows. It seems that on one side, there's abundant language resources available in the SA context for learners to apply the acquired linguistic knowledge on the spot; on the other side, language use may mostly occur in an informal communicative way that alleviate learners' pressure on focusing on grammatical structure as in the AH context where language is normally produced with the presence of language teacher.

Research also showed that studying abroad increased learners' knowledge on vocabulary. Milton and Meara (1995) examined change of English vocabulary size of 53 European exchange students after six months of university exchange programs in Britain and found out sizable improvement at the end of the SA period, with a mean growth of 1326 words, which means they acquired English words nearly five-time faster in Britain than at home. Further interpretation about the data showed considerable individual variations when it comes to each subject's vocabulary growth: high-level students who had already reached the threshold of approximately 7500 words benefited more from the original AH learning context than the SA learning context, comparing other low-level counterparts.

In a study of Collentine (2004), SA learner's development of general grammatical and lexical abilities showed no superiority over AH settings. The data derived from an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) of 46 English-speaking learners of Spanish from SA and AH learning contexts that both lasted one semester. The study abroad program, situated in Spain, differed from the AH context by the richness of opportunities and obligations to employ Spanish in various real-life situations. It was reported that the utterances generated by the SA group were more semantically dense and more fluent, partly because the SA context enabled much more vivid instantiation of linguistic knowledge, such as unique lexemes or narrative discourse than the AH

setting. However, although SA learners performed better in narrative abilities by demonstrating a higher lexical density, AH learners obviously gained significant progress in Spanish grammar thanks to their formal language instruction. Focus-on-form instructions enable learners more time to build up and reflect on grammatical system of TL. Hence a grammatical deepening is witnessed in AH context, whereas in SA contexts, communicative needs and productions benefit them in the usage of varied structure in a more native-like way. These findings support the general assumption of different benefits of both learning contexts.

In-country language learning could not only be efficient at enhancing one's oral or lexical performance but it also demonstrated advantages on enriching one's sociolinguistic competence of L2 --- the ability to recognize and produce, either in oral or written forms, the opportune language in a given sociocultural context (Swain, 1985). Regan (1995) found out that after a year of stay in francophone countries (France and Brussels), 6 advanced Irish learners were able to adopt more frequently the deletion of the French negative particle *ne* which is a very convincing indicator of sociolinguistic competence progress in that they knew how to adapt the structure of their enunciation to diverse contexts.

In general, findings gleaned by researchers all around the world until today have reported numerous types and different degrees of language gains according to their target SA contexts. One might run the risk of being imprudent if any conclusive judgement about promised advantages of SA learning context were extracted from limited studies which represent only the tip of an iceberg.

### 1.2.3 Change of learners' perspective

Studies on language learners' perspectives of TL, TL learning, TC and their own SA experience can be useful for understanding a great deal of issues that concern learners' learning behaviors, motivations and SA programs themselves. In spite of the questionable validity, reliability and generalizability of the introspective and qualitative nature of researches within this domain (Pellegrino, 1998), their values are still undeniable: researchers, language teachers and learners, program designers and

administrators can benefit from the research findings as they reveal parts of the process of language acquisition not only at SA contexts but also from a point of view of a learner. For example, the abundant opportunities for social interactions with native speakers seems advantageous to L2 learning. However, introspective research indicates that not all learners know how to take full advantage of the extensive chances and there are cross-cultural, individual and linguistic factors that hinder the use of authentic language resources. Such results may aid people involved in the learning and teaching procedure to enhance the ratio and quality of learners' language use outside classroom and provide them with a more adequate and personalized courses. The texture and richness of students' perceptions on studying abroad provide tremendous insights into the pros and cons of in-country language study (Pellegrino, 1998).

In a new learning environment, learners face the need to adapt not only to the unexpected amount of L2, but also to the change of their role in language learning. Amuzie and Winke (2009) examined how study abroad and lengths of study abroad affected ESL learners' beliefs on teacher's role, learner autonomy and self-efficacy. Participants were 70 international students enrolled in two universities in the United States, in which 55 of them were from East Asian countries (30 Korean, 22 Chinese, 2 Japanese and 1 Vietnamese). Based on the lengths of time of participants' stay in America, they were divided into one group with students who had been in the United States from six months to two years and other group that consisted of those who had spent shorter time, i.e. no more than six months, in the United States. The findings from their quantitative and qualitative studies suggest that the change of learning context from home country to abroad directly changed these learners' beliefs about learning autonomy and teacher's role in language learning. The longer the SA period was, the stronger the beliefs students would have on learning autonomy. In other words, as the time abroad developed, students showcased growth in beliefs about the importance of learner independence and came to less strongly believe in the importance of language teacher's role in L2 learning. However, the study revealed that the time abroad might not be the only factor that promoted beliefs in learner

autonomy. Participants reported that they experienced frustration and disappointment because of the discrepancy between their expectations of language exposure in the United States and the actual opportunities they had to interact with native speakers. In the new learning context, they still frequently stayed together with people who spoke the same L1 either inside or outside the English classroom. The negative sentiments made them realize that mere change of external environment was not sufficient for obtaining learning success, and this later on became a thrust for learners to make extra efforts to be proactive at taking advantages of being abroad. Moreover, the pedagogical ideas and methods in the United States were reported to be extremely different from those one most of the participants received in their home countries where teacher-fronted language classes, grammar translation and audiolingualim prevailed. These altogether probably helped participants to become conscious about their role and responsibilities in the SA context and reshaped learner's beliefs.

Studies on learners' perspectives are not a novelty in the literature. Back in 1980s, Schumann (1980) drew meaningful conclusions from self-investigative journals by logging thoughts, feelings and daily events when she was learning Farsi in Iran. Except the six personal variables that had been reported that might hinder language acquisition in the TL country -- nesting patterns, transition anxiety, reactions to pedagogical techniques, motivations for choice of language learning materials, desire to maintain one's own language learning agenda and eavesdropping vs. speaking as a language learning strategy -- she discovered another four situation-based personal factors that she personally experienced during her stay in Iran: for example, the role of the expatriot community and the disadvantages of being a female English-speaking L2 learner. Schumann's introspective study provided particular insights into a learner's psychological reactions to the external environment that could probably be applied to a larger cohort of learners: the impact of living conditions on learner's mental preparation for language learning in a new country, which was termed as nesting patterns; travel-related anxiety caused by learners' transition from home country to foreign country; effects of unfamiliar pedagogical techniques, materials and L2 teachers' learning agendas that are so different from

their own ones that they have to compromise; conflicts between learners' habits to learn language through listening and interactive learning strategies which were more encouraged by most of the L2 teachers... Detailed records of self-observation during a certain period of language learning are absolutely subjective, still they are able to unveil the learners' inner thoughts of their language learning experience and demonstrate potential effects produced by SA contexts. Personal affective response to the learning situation could be so meaningful that perceived success with a FL/L2 becomes the reward for studying (Bailey, 1980). Although learners' perceptions cannot be adopted to directly quantify the SA efficacy, they can and should be an important reference for assessing language acquisition in different contexts. In a study of Muñoz (2012), nearly half of the interviewed undergraduate students identified studying abroad as a critical turning point in their English learning trajectory. The intensive and extensive exposure to the TL and constant language use or practice brought about a qualitative change in these students learning history. Learners' perspectives or evaluations reflect not only the role of the SA experience during their entire learning process, but also the successfulness and advantages of changing the learning context.

Nevertheless, learners' perspectives towards TL or TC are not static, so they can change and maybe go through different stages over time. Tragant (2012) was managed to capture these changes: students grew fonder of the language they studied and became more optimistic about future achievement in listening, but they showed less interest in exploring TC at the end of the period. In the meantime, an overwhelming majority of students reported having noticed great improvement in productive skills, receptive skills and vocabulary development as a result of study abroad. Such results are coherent with the belief that learner's beliefs are dynamic, socially constructed, relational and responsive to the length of exposure to the SA context (Amuzie & Winke, 2009). The sensibility of personal perspectives to individual variables, social factors and, in particular, learners' ability to use L2 with people outside the daily study group, sounds the alarm that all of us should be cautious when we interpret the data drew from subjective or possibly biased thoughts.

In summary, research in this area has presented multiple explanations for certain learner-related phenomena and have paved the path for future investigation into learners' beliefs about the processes or results of studying languages abroad.

### 1.3 Limitations of studying a language abroad

Even though learning context is condemned to be an important causal factor of second language acquisition (Regan, 1998), gaining better linguistic achievements still hasn't been proved to be the corollary of studying abroad. It is widely accepted that physically staying inside the country where one's TL is spoken yields better language acquisition than remaining at his/her home country where TL is taught as a foreign language. However, there are studies suggesting that it is not necessarily the whole story. For instance, pragmatic development in study-abroad context is often found to be modest. One of the reasons could be learner's maladaptation to the new learning context. Knowing how to mobilize strategies enhances language and culture knowledge during student's study-abroad period (Cohen & Shively, 2007). Unfortunately, students might probably take only a little bit of advantage or don't even know how to take advantage of opportunities presented in the learning environment. Even in cases where a SA context does bear fruit, it's hard to see an overall improvement in all language competence. Intensive exposure or immersion does not guarantee learner's participation in the relevant context of use with enough frequency and the appropriate predisposition (Muñoz, 2012). The "disappointing" performance of SA programs may be attributed to intricate program-based and learner-based variables: such as, length of stay, intensity of language courses, types of extracurricular L2 contact, learners' aptitude, entry level, etc.

The complexity and diversity of SA programs require that certain conditions must be met in order to enhance learners' knowledge system and language competence (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011). The following sections will analyze three important variables that impact on language improvement in SA context: L2 exposure, learners' threshold level and individual variables.



### 1.3.1 Understanding language exposure

When language students are placed in situations that can provide them with opportunities for direct, meaningful and sustained contact with native speakers, language enhancement is more possible to be achieved. First-hand exposure to the local culture, for instance, living with native-speaker host family, extends learners' language and intercultural learning beyond classroom to actual TL society, even for short-term SA experience (Jackson, 2006). Unfortunately, not every language learner has the privilege to live with host family when they study abroad. At this moment, formal language instruction classroom remains an important source of language input. However, its effect is under the control of total instructional time and intensity. Small amounts of language exposure and language use distributed over a long period of time, for example, a 40-hour long regular language course that lasts for 10 months, are proved to be inefficient for guaranteeing enhancement in communicative competency (White & Turner, 2012). Hence, in most cases, SA learners are exposed to both communicative and learning contexts in which L2 represent respectively a tool for communication and a learning object (Batstone, 2002). In light of authentic language exposure, a SA context demonstrates superior advantages over AH context both in terms of quantity and quality of exposure.

The amount of language exposure that are available for SA learners is conditioned by three types of opportunities that exist inside and outside the language classroom. To be more detailed, in SA settings, L2 acquirers are apt to come into contact with "teacher talk" that consists of classroom exercises and/or teachers' explanation in the TL, "interlanguage talk" used among non-native speakers and "foreigner talk" enunciated by native speakers with the purpose of communicating with non-native interlocutors. Studies suggest that these three simple codes could be of tremendous help at L2 learner's initial and intermediate stages of acquisition (Krashen, 1980). Basing on this theory, the major exposure to TL during a period of sojourn abroad may stem from the organization of SA language instruction and interactions with other speakers. L2 Instruction provides the chance for them to

understand and absorb linguistic knowledge, while the language environment outside the classroom is the real arena for them to practice newly acquired knowledge. It is through the interactions with native and possibly also non-native speakers that a learner can perceive new forms of TL and hereby push his/her interlanguage system towards a more native-like standard (Anderson, 1988). Nevertheless, individual variables, herein represented by learners' ability to avail themselves for establishing contact with the target language, can affect the amount and intensity of language exposure outside the classroom (Pérez-Vidal et al., 2012).

SA context is full of authentic L2 input, which can be defined as accessible and comprehensible vocal utterances produced either by learners themselves or other native/non-native L2 speakers (Flege, 2009). The total amount of input in target language received by learners and the amount of L2 use has significant influence on language development, for example their acquisition of an authentic accent (Flege, 2009). The predictive power of language input on one's L2 learning outcomes has long been underestimated, partly because of the subjectivity of common research measurement of language use, i.e. self reports, and the practical limitations of actually registering one's daily linguistic output (Flege, 2002).

Swain (1985) argued that comprehensible input was essential but limited for L2 students to achieve native-like competence in different language aspects, but comprehensible output was a necessary component of acquisition independent of comprehensible input. In contrast, the output provided opportunities for students to contextualize discourses in L2 and make meaning-negotiated exchanges. Unfortunately, comprehensible output is generally missing inside and outside language classroom settings. In Swain's study, even though students of French had received comprehensible input which largely came from native teacher talk, nonnative peer talk and experience with literacy activities for almost seven years, language use outside the classroom was infrequent and limited. In other words, these children didn't have enough "push" to make meaningful use of linguistic resources or to pay attention to convey precise, coherent and appropriate messages in the target language. In addition, language input occurred inside the language classroom seemed to be

immobilized in that students needed no to make effort to try different forms in French in order to be understood by teachers and peers. Thereby, the comprehensible input itself was not enough for language acquisition because the ability to understand meanings is not equivalent to be capable of produce unlimited utterances. By producing utterances in target language, learners transfer the previously comprehended semantic knowledge of language to a syntactic or morphological use and probably receive feedback from others through negotiation (Gass, 2003). Language use outside the classroom was also revealed to play an important role in facilitating the acquisition of L2 phonology, namely helping learners approximate their pronunciation to a more native-like level (Díaz-Campos, 2004). By being exposing to the authentic language environment, learners will be able to map new linguistic forms with the function and finally internalize their input information of target language (Batstone, 2002). Study abroad provides rich contextual sources of forms and meanings that enable learners to engage with the target language by producing output. Batstone also pointed out that generating output required one to take the risk of making errors and therefore it could be difficult when psychological factors intervened.

Appropriate amount of L2 input or output opportunities is not guaranteed by the context because students have different accessibility to these resources and the most likely scenario is that it's hard for SA students to build contact with native speakers. Groups of students of the same L1 are found often in the same SA programs or even same classrooms. So even if students socialize with other students from same country or even from different countries by speaking to each other in the TL, the large amount of interlanguage talk or foreigner talk may decrease the level or quality of L2 input (Barron, 2006).

In fact, the degree of engagement in learning context depends not only on learners' ability in managing L2 input and output, but also on the nature of context itself. The model of three contextual levels of language learning developed by Housen et al. (2011) provides a more socio-cognitive way to describe the intricate interplay of external, contextual and intrapersonal factors inside different learning contexts of

instructed second language acquisition. According to them, a learning context can be represented as a three-level hierarchy that comprises various conditions at each level. As represented in Figure 1, extra-curricular and curricular contexts are allocated respectively to the macro- and meso-levels as they literally include the physical and sociolinguistic settings external to learners, for example, language classrooms, educational policies, pedagogical approaches, out-of-school community. Meanwhile, the individual learning context, shaped by learner-based variables such as one's orientations or personality, is viewed as the micro-level of a learning context. Originally, the graph below was used as a tool to illustrate different contextual conditions within different English-learning contexts in these authors' extended study (i.e. EFL in Germany, Brussels and UK), for the prominence of participants' L1 and L2 changed in terms of macro- and meso-levels according to each context. The revelation of different dimensions of language learning contexts is crucial for analyzing input or output opportunities available for learners although they might respond to the language resources with various degrees of engagement. It's arguable that even though the prominence of L1 and L2 is determined primarily by learners' physical surroundings, learners might make their own choices on language preference in different context. Formal language instruction itself in SA context can not ensure high-level language achievement because there are extra-curricular and individual conditions that affect active and productive language use (Housen & Beardsmore, 1987). At-home students who are conscious about the significance of language exposure in language acquisition and actively seek out and create circumstances that permit more meaningful input or two-way communications in the TL may also be able to obtain greater overall linguistic improvement with the help of intensive instruction. Despite the unique contextual advantages, development in certain language aspects in study-abroad students may be hampered by individual factors that lead to a refusal towards taking advantage of authentic L2 exposure or a more communication-wise and less focus-on-form curricular design.

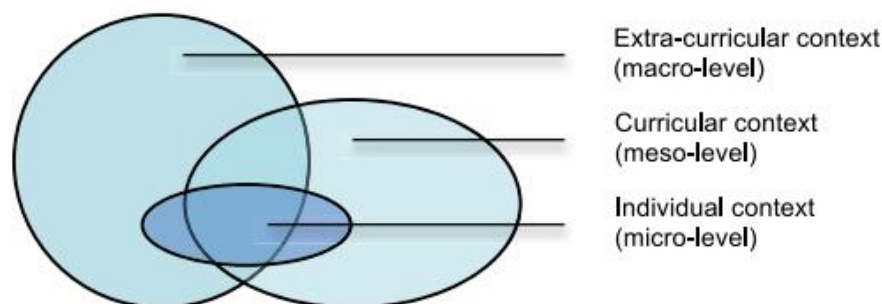


Figure 1. Three levels of learning context (Housen et al., 2011)

It is believed that the quality and quantity of input impacts profoundly on L2 attainment even on a long-term basis. For language learners, benefits of systematic exposure to TL resources are immensely powerful in that learners' talker-learning abilities can be improved even without having precious speaking proficiency or functional phonological competence in that unfamiliar language (Orena et al., 2015). After having acknowledged that language use is essential to the development and the ultimate acquisition of language, it's time to push the focus onto how to operationalize the assessment of the quality/quantity of learners' engagement within a learning context. In terms of quantity, it seems that longer stay in SA context could enable more language development. However, even though longer length of in-country residence appears to be an effective predictor of L2 improvement, only if there is a substantial amount of conversational input or formal instruction from native speakers (Flege & Liu, 2001). A widely-used tool for measuring language contact outside the classroom is the Language Contact Profile (Freed et al., 2004) originally designed by Freed in the '90s, which served to collect types and frequency of participants' language use. Moyer (2009) argued that input should be viewed as a fundamentally qualitative-nature research problem which is related to learners' experience of the utilization of the TL. In the literature, attempts have been made to investigate learners' engagement in the L2 environment by quantifying length of stay or hours of language use outside classroom, but seldom has the quality of language been researchers' focus. Moyer then underscored the importance of understanding sources, or domains of learners' real language use as one of the key factors that

influence SLA. By real communication in L2, she referred to scenarios that serve a deep social or emotional function, for example, a L2 learning experience with host family which might guarantee meaningful and consistent participation in the repertoire of competence practices. Again, it's not practical for the most of future language learning cases at the executive level.

Learning second language abroad through formal study may not be an one-time solution for language growth --- it is individual's ability of integrating into the target learning environment that best indicates language development, for example, by expanding social networks with native speakers (Milton & Meara, 1995). However, the difficulty of non-native learners' integration in target culture seems to be a reoccurring phenomenon among SA studies, regardless of learners' nationalities. As has already been discussed above, accessibility to authentic language resources outside the classroom setting could be limited by variables like program-based conditions, an individual's ability and orientations. Despite the extensive opportunities to communicate with native speakers in SA context, seldom are learners successful at assimilating themselves into the target culture (O'Donnell, 2005). Establishing relationships with locals is not easy for foreigners who haven't acquired a certain level of L2 fluency or who are less extrovert in interpersonal communications. Students may also be reluctant to break out of their social circle with companions who speak the same mother tongue as them. Plus, nowadays learners' SA experiences are deeply influenced by globalization and the development of telecommunications technology which make exploration of target culture a more personal choice (Kinging, 2008; Liu, 2018).

In the literature, there's also different voice questioning the effects of language exposure: Wilkinson (2002) tape-recorded conversations in French produced some American SA students during a summer overseas study and revealed that instructional atmosphere heavily patterned these participants' out-of-class L2 interaction. In other words, they kept maintaining classroom roles and discourse forms even outside formal language instructional setting. The results challenged the common assumption about the naturalistic and highly pragmatic context to which learners are supposed to

be exposed. There's no doubt that future studies will still have to explore more aspects of SA learners' language exposure.

### 1.3.2 The threshold theory

Researchers have been trying to figure out prerequisites and predictors of successful L2 gain in SA environment. A basic threshold level was confirmed to be necessary in order to guarantee, or at least predict further language improvement, even though this improvement obtained in SA context might be limited in specific linguistic skills. Comparative SA-AH (study-abroad V.S. at-home) studies have also revealed the evident existence of threshold effect that impedes significant progress at the early stages. Learners with higher initial oral ability are reported to engage in out-of-classroom interaction and have more solid knowledge to process longer L2 messages (Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Golonka (2006) discovered that learners of Russian with higher levels of grammatical control and metalinguistic awareness before study abroad were more likely to reach the Advanced level of oral proficiency during study abroad period. Serrano (2012) also pointed out that intensive SA instruction worked well with learners with at least intermediate proficiency level, which indicates a possible correlation between learners' previous language level and their acquisition outcomes after a period of an intensive language learning period. The acquired knowledge not only prepares a minimal linguistic foundation for later acquisition, but produces positive psychological effects that favor the learning process, such as, boosting learners' communicative confidence, impulsing them to search for more communication opportunities outside the language classroom (Lightbown and Spada, 1991) and furthermore, to explore various aspects regarding this L2 (extralinguistic, sociolinguistic, cultural elements, etc.).

Quantitative and qualitative data from a study by DeKeyser (2010) on 16 American students' short-term learning experience in Argentina corroborated the correlation between students' pre-departure language level and the extent to which they were capable of monitoring language output in actual day-to-day communication

with native speakers in Spanish --- students who were better prepared with adequate linguistic knowledge tended to learn effectively in informal interaction, while low-level students still had to struggle on forms and keep making up grammatical ability in language classes. Surprisingly but interestingly, after two years of FL instruction at college and strong motivation towards Spanish learning, students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary were so illy equipped that they were continuously creating erroneous or even nonexistent forms and applying word-for-word translation from L1 to L2. Their struggle and failure at producing and comprehending Spanish led not only to disappointing gains on TL accuracy, but also a feeling of demoralization towards language learning and deep doubts about the efficacy of studying abroad.

Seemingly, there is a direct causality of pre-departure proficiency and L2 learning outcome - the higher the better. However, Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau (2011) argued in their study that intermediate-level students obtained greater benefits from SA programs than students with respectively better proficiency. This could probably be attributed to the "ceiling effect", as proposed by Rifkin (2005), referring to a barrier that is hard to break through by FL learners without change of instructional or environmental conditions.

All in all, a minimal level of proficiency predicts greater possibility of attaining TL improvement. Therefore, in pedagogical practice it's highly recommendable to equip students with sufficient preparational language courses before they depart for target countries. In this way, the comprehensibility and learnability of the rich language resource available at SA context are increased. Accordingly, learners may be able to recognize and practice more varied forms at ease.

### 1.3.3 Individual variables

Although it is generally recognized that studying abroad is an ideal chance for L2 learners to make language progress at a very fast pace, little do we know about the sophistication inside this procedure (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Internal variables, including



learners' aptitude, motivation, self-regulation, etc, play a significant role in language acquisition, yet are often out of the control of program designers and language educators. For instance, learners' predisposed cognitive and metacognitive abilities can affect language acquisition outcomes that take place in SA contexts (Collentine, 2009). Nevertheless, it's almost impossible to shift these innate abilities root deeply in individual's cognitive mechanisms within a limited time given by SA programs.

Principally, aptitude (one's predisposed abilities for language learning), motivation (which bears upon learners' learning behaviors, willingness, persistence, etc) and self-regulation (i.e. learners' dedication to improve language proficiency and learning effectiveness) are considered as the most consistent predictors of L2 attainment (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Individual differences in SL or FL acquisition comprise a wide spectrum of cognitive, psychological, affective or emotional variables that influence language learning achievement. Causes of these variations are also intricate: Sparks and Ganschow (1991) argued that deficiencies manifested in one's first language are very likely to result in the learning of other non-primary languages in the form of "low motivation, poor attitude, or high levels of anxiety" (1991:9). Although these variables are observable and adjustable from language instructors' point of view, it's important to keep in mind that factors such as learners' motivation, attitudes towards TC or TL, learning strategies are not fixed. L2 learning experience has impact on the mutation of individual's consciousness, which leads to the change of not only behaviors, but also a learner's perception on L2 learning process.

In terms of motivation, the latest popular conceptualization of motivation is the theory of L2 Motivational Self System developed by Dörnyei in 2005, in which L2 learning motivation was analyzed within the psychological realm. The theory considered learners' ideal self and ought self as central components in the motivation system, based on previous traditional concepts of integrativeness, namely one's original interest or curiosity towards the learning of L2 in order to communicate with the speaking community of such language. The ideal L2 self and ought self refer to the learners' attitude towards native L2 speakers and the instrumentality of L2

learning which is logically linked to learner's ideal self (Dörnyei, 2009). Motivation is the main impetus and driving force of achieving long-term L2 learning goals (Dörnyei, 1998), yet it's closely correlated with learners' cultural backgrounds. Taguchi et al. (2009) examined Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System in country-specific contexts (Japan, China and Iran) and revealed different patterns of learner's motivation from those in Dörnyei's study. For example, in their study, Chinese and Iranian participants tended to develop a more counterbalanced ideal L2 self that combined both positive attitudes toward the language and the culture they were studying and the pragmatic utility of language attainment (i.e. instrumentality). However, although the Japanese learners personally agreed about the ideal self in English learning, they were less agreed about the potential affect of English on their success of profession in future.

There's no doubt that learner's beliefs about L2 learning or attitudes towards the L2-speaking community may experience change during their SA experiences. Previously mentioned studies on SA learners' perceptions have confirmed the dynamics of affective factors under the influence of different learning contexts. Another pertinent research of Dörnyei et al. in 2004 reported that students' acquisition of English formulaic language was strongly influenced by individual variables, i.e. language aptitude, motivation and adaptive ability to target sociocultural context. The acquisition of formulaic phrases can reflect the extent to which one has absorbed the sociocultural aspect of TL. In other words, active engagement in the native-speaker community empowers learner extensive opportunities to practice authentic formulaic language and phraseologies that exist beyond textbooks and outside their academic environment. On the contrary, students who fail to acquire knowledge of formulaic expressions in the SA learning context are liable to maintain a less native-like proficiency of L2. Among the three elements listed above, the sociocultural adaption was found to be the most robust factor that affected participants' interactions with native speakers and thereby, enhanced their L2 learning in SA context.

Even though SA studies on individual factors are still in its budding stage, research in the domain of SLA/FLL (foreign language learning) have already

constructed a theoretical and methodological footstone and offered examples for future empirical studies in diverse learning contexts.

## **Chap 2 Italian as FL/L2 for Chinese-speaking learners**

### **2.1 “Lingua italiana” for Chinese-speaking learners**

The first part of the second chapter focuses on certain issues regarding studying Italian as FL/L2 from a perspective of Chinese-speaking learners. First and foremost, as languages, Chinese and Italian are typologically different in several aspects. It's necessary to clarify how these intrinsic crosslinguistic differences could possibly cause learning difficulty for Chinese learners, concentrating mainly on the concept of typological distance and the influence of L1 on FL/L2 learning. Linguistic or cultural distance obviously has some effect on the amount of “transferable” linguistic knowledge, the frequency of appearance of interlingual errors and learners' readiness to transfer (Swan, 1997). Learning a language which is related to learners' mother tongue is definitely more advantageous than studying a language which doesn't share much common ground with L1. Except the typological distance between two languages, learners' personalities, background culture, learning experience and motivation play decisive roles in their language transfer ability. Therefore, the argumentation carries on with an analysis about current situations of Italian teaching/learning in China and an introduction of major ways through which Chinese learners can have access to Italian language courses.

#### **2.1.1 Italian as a FL/L2 for Chinese-speaking learners**

As an isolating language, Chinese is devoid of inflectional morphology which is one of the most evident linguistic components that characterized analytical languages like Italian (Abbiati, 2015). The distinguished typological difference between Chinese and

Italian thus make it almost impossible for Chinese learners to quickly construct a systematic interconnection of relevant morphosyntactic and grammatical components between two languages, as they are not accustomed to assigning grammatical information to nouns, verbs and adjectives in each utterance, such as number, person, gender, time, etc. Structural differences that characterize the way how Chinese and Italian respectively express the tense of verb, i.e. the polymorphism in Italian and the use of external morpheme (for example, adverbs) for modifying tense in Chinese, complicate the acquisition of Italian for non-native speakers who do not possess equivalent morphological sensibility to native speakers (Giacalone Ramat & Banfi, 2003).

According to Andorno (2010), the acquisition of Italian morphosyntactic rules is an arduous task for Chinese-speaking learners because of three levels of linguistic discrepancies existing between their L1 and Italian -- 1) phonetic differences: in general, Chinese words are prevalently monosyllabic or bisyllabic while most of the Italian words are polysyllabic, which may render Italian words extremely long in Chinese learners' eyes; 2) from a point of view of semantic differences, the creation of words in Chinese relies on composition of smaller autonomous lexemes, namely characters, which already contain rich semantic information; while Italian words are not less semantically rich compared with Chinese words. Besides, decoding Italian words is less efficient for non-native speakers and requires a great amount of abstract etymological knowledge; 3) at grammatical levels, Italian has a more rigid system on lexical categorization and inflections compared with Chinese, as it's repeatedly addressed in relevant studies on Chinese' learners' interlanguage.

Two peculiarities demonstrated by Chinese-speaking learners of Italian as L2 demonstrate are that they may not particularly incline to morphological development and tend to have slower acquisition in terms of syntax (Valentini, 2003). Interestingly, in Valentini's study, the supportive role of a Chinese learner's (Peter) linguistic competence in English had prematurely prepared him for the acquisition of Italian subordination, as English is typologically more similar to TL than learner's L1. This finding confirms the hypothesis that the bigger the typological differences between

learners' L1 and the TL, the more difficulty will learners encounter during the study of TL. Even though learners may have additional FL skills or language learning experience other than L1 (i.e. English as in most Chinese learners' cases), the degree of helpfulness on the acquisition of Italian in SA context has not been investigated thoroughly with a larger group of research subjects.

Giacalone Ramat (2003) argued that morphologic errors distinguish native speakers from non-native speakers, particularly at advanced proficiency level or in formal communicative contexts. For learners whose L1 doesn't provide grammatical information explicitly through markers such as gender of nouns or verb agreement, the acquisition of Italian as L2 requires not the understanding of words' variation at a superficial level, but a gradual semantic-cognitive procedure of conceptualization and attainment of word forms and rules of agreement that learners are not used to. For example, it's complicated for non-native speakers to speculate the correct gender of nouns that refer to inanimate objects or abstract concepts, simply based on their semantic properties. The typological distance between learners' mother tongue and TL tends to result in delayed acquisition of Italian morphology.

L2 facilitators of 35 immigrated Chinese pupils investigated by Favaro (2003) revealed the major difficulties in four linguistic areas that Chinese-speaking learners normally encountered during TL learning: phonological aspects; writing ability; morphological aspects and finally, syntactic competence. For example, these Chinese-speaking learners persistently demonstrated learning difficulty in discriminating a pair of Italian phonemes -- alveolar trill /r/ and the dental-alveolar /l/ -- in comprehension tasks. Problems regarding writing skill emerged mostly in difficulties of the use of capital form or space in lettering and in understanding cursive calligraphy. These pupils also had difficulties acquiring Italian variable verb forms: present tense and infinite forms were overly adopted, even in inadequate contexts; articles were often omitted or used without considering word accordance; Chinese quantifiers were wrongly transferred into Italian during the translation of nominal phrases. Resistance to the use of relative sentences and preference towards adopting only topic/comment order in constructing sentences also seemed to be a common

phenomena among these learners. The findings indicate learners' propensity of transferring grammatical knowledge of L1 to L2 and maintaining original habits of L1 to form expressions in L2. Recourse to cultural-linguistic knowledge of L1 or competences in other languages already obtained by learners is a typical phase of SLA that may accelerate or postpone the attainment of certain aspects of target language or successful transfer from acquired language to TL, depending on both external and internal variables such as the typological distance between the involved languages, learner's personality, age, etc (Chini, 2010).

Similarly, in Banfi and Ramat's (2003) study on the interlanguage of 7 Chinese-speaking subjects' performance in Chinese-Italian translation task, it was reported that relative clauses seldom occurred or were sometimes even absent. All of them had completed nine-year compulsory education in China and were second-year enrolled university students in Italy during the course of research. In the few times in which relative clauses was adopted to translate sentences, they appeared in formulaic patterns which were rigidly memorized by learners during language study. Among all the 63 sentences translated by participants, 85.7% of the sentences resulted erroneous, semantically or morphologically unnatural. Concerning syntactic characteristics of relative clauses, Italian and Chinese are two opposite languages: Italian has postnominal relative clauses while prenominal collocation prevails in Chinese relative sentences or phrases. It's observable that during translation, participants mechanically inferred constituent structures of Italian from L1 or used semantically approximate translation in order to avoid introducing a relative clause. These results confirmed Chinese learners' difficulty in managing syntactic structure of a TL that is typologically remote from their L1.

For native Chinese speakers, the acquisition of Italian as a second/foreign language requires extra endeavor in two specific areas: learners' consciousness of grammatical categories of Italian verbs and mastery of morphosyntactic strategies that can convey the grammatical information of verbs (Arcodia, 2010). The reason why Chinese learners have such difficulty in mastering verbal conjugation or subordinate sentences within an expected time range of Italian learning, no matter in a SA or AH

context, is totally imputable in that these fundamental linguistic elements of TL are absent in the scaffolding of their L1 and therefore, they may seem very alien to learner's cognitive system at the initial stage of language acquisition.

However, Rastelli (2010a) argued that the major handicap of Chinese learners should not be solely attributed to the typological distance between L1 and L2, but to different processing habits which speakers of different languages normally get used to. For example, Chinese-speaking learners and native Italian speakers have very different eye-tracking rates and reading habits: it's easier for NSs to fastly extract semantic information and skip words by intuition during a reading/listening task than non-NSs. In his study, Rastelli confronted the processing habits of three groups of students of Italian -- European Erasmus students, Chinese students who were in the course of pre-university language study (i.e. Chinese students with more access to interactions with native speakers inside/outside classroom), Chinese students who had already finished the same preperational language program and were attending universities in Italy (i.e. Chinese students with much less language exposure) -- the data revealed that Chinese and European subjects in his study shared similar pattern in terms of implicit grammatical judgement. Factors such as recency of intensive language instruction, total language study time and interactions with native speakers weigh more than the typological distance between Chinese and Italian. Therefore, recognizing students' language backgrounds also means understanding a larger picture of individual diversity, rather than merely discussing different linguistic knowledge or ability possessed by a cohort of students that speak same mother tongue.

Apart from the typological distance, another factor that probably creates great influence on Chinese learners' difficulty of learning Italian grammar is their radical cultural attitude towards L1/L2/FL grammar teaching (Pellin, 2010). One the one hand, grammar teaching or studies on grammatical theories had never had an significant role throughout the history of language education in China before 1950s, which led to the lack of public recognition and familiarity with the discipline of grammar and linguistics. On the other hand, nowadays didactics of FLs (i.e. English)

in today's China is still strongly characterized with the "notorious" grammar-oriented methodology which has been criticized and gradually abandoned by the Occidental. Thus, the difficulty of learning Italian grammar may not reside in the number or complexity of grammatical rules, but in learners' habitual teaching methods of a non-primary language. In other words, normally when Chinese-speaking learners approach a new language, they tend to focus excessively on form that could lead to another extreme of less attention on the understanding of the nature of TL's structure and the importance of practices for real-life language use, for instance, oral production and academic writing.

Having Chinese as L1 not only implies the type of learners' linguistic provenience, but is a strong indicator of learner's cultural background of learning that tells the story of one's precedent language learning experience and most importantly, his/her learning style. Therefore, Chinese learners at SA contexts often need to change their original language learning style in order to effectively fit into the different language teaching style adopted by the Occidental academic system (Matteini, 2010). The gap between Chinese and Italian's cultures of language pedagogy creates obstacles for both learners and their Italian instructors who are normally more familiar with students that have L2 learning experiences under more or less the same language education framework as the one adopted in Europe (Piccinini, 2010).

Indeed, Chinese-speaking learner's FL learning experience and cultural background turn out to be multidimensional in that numerous aspects of L1, learning habits, pedagogic practices, expectations and interpretations should be taken into serious consideration by SA program designers and L2 instructors (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Intensive courses of Italian in the SA context were proved to have a decisive role in facilitating the acquisition of Italian for Chinese-speaking young adult by explicitly directing learners' attention onto the particularly challenging morphosyntactic components, actively helping them to understand the grammatical mechanism of TL and acquire the cognitive-semantic categories of Italian that are not codified in the same way as in Chinese (Andorno, 2010; Biazzi, 2010). Moreover, integrative pedagogic intervention at an intensive rate within a longer period of



instruction time seems to be effective solution. Authentic language input has an indispensable role of input in helping learners of language with inflectional morphology to build up or consolidate competence of distinguishing word forms and their functions (Giacalone Ramat & Banfi, 2003).

In order to activate Chinese learners' cognitive potential of conceptualizing the time and space of Italian verbs, it's necessary to lead these learners to a recategorization or reconsideration of L1. Furthermore, informed teaching may be of avail for students to distinguish and connect both similarities and dissimilarities between L1 and TL (Swan, 1997). The maneuverability and real-life practices of diversiform pedagogic solutions should be taken into consideration under subsistent circumstances, namely availability of teaching resources within the learning context, learners' motives of studying a FL/L2, education background, etc.

### 2.1.2 Motives of learning Italian

For Chinese prospective students who choose to continue their academic path after high schools, choices are not limited in the domestic area. Needs for the diversification of educational resources have promoted the accomplishment of bilateral agreement on mutual degree qualification between China and many other countries, which led to the surge of the percentage of Chinese students abroad and people's sustained enthusiasm towards studying abroad. Statistics shows that from 2016 to 2019, there were over 2.5 million Chinese students flowed to other countries for study purpose in which almost 80 % of them came back to China after finishing their study (Yu, 2020). China produces the biggest source of overseas students in the world, especially for developed countries in Europe and America (Song, 2018).

Studying abroad allows student to upgrade his/her own educational background in a bid to gain better opportunities at job market. Therefore, it is no wonder that for Chinese people, study abroad has long been descried and considered as the "gold-plating" procedure of one's resume. Anecdotally, even though the eligibility criteria of international students vary from country to country, from university to

university and often, requirements of admission of most of the foreign universities are relatively easier to be met, comparing to the fierce competition of Chinese College Entrance Exam (i.e. “Gao Kao”). According to the latest data, in 2020 there were over 10 millions students applied for Gao Kao (Song, 2020). In addition, the possibility of overseas study broadens the range of options in terms of courses, teaching methods, teacher resources, instructional and cultural environment. In a foreseeable future, the amount of Chinese students and their passion of pursuing university degree overseas will continue to increase steadily.

Italy has become one of the Chinese students destination countries for study purpose since 2006, the year in which the significant pre-enrollment language program “Marco Polo”, designed for Chinese students, was carried out in the hope of ameliorating their difficulty of learning Italian, as the majority of courses of Italian universities is conducted in Italian. In 2006, 1.666 national visas for study purpose were issued to Chinese students and five years later the number increased to 4.214. Moreover, China and America had occupied not only almost half of amount of national visas, but stably ranked the first two places since 2007 (European Migration Network, 2012). Recent data shows that Italy ranks as the fourth popular European destination for Chinese tertiary-level students in 2018, after the United Kingdom, Germany and France, while for Italy, China made up its biggest proportion of international students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). In 2020, Italian educational association Uni-italia carried out a survey on 600 Chinese students, investigating their motives of choosing Italy as destination country for higher education and in which 31% reported that they were attracted by the convenience created by projects of Marco Polo and Turandot; 30% of them considered lower education and life expenses in Italy; 28% of them were attracted mainly by the professionalism of Italian universities in certain disciplines, for example, art, design, architecture, music and engineering and at last, only 11% of participants mentioned the advantages of knowing Italian for establishing better carrier path.

In a statistical report of Istat (2019) on non-EU citizens in Italy in the year of 2018, it was documented that 40.1% of Chinese obtained their legal status of sojourn

in Italy with study purpose, which was the highest record within the same category. The permit of stay for study purpose is reserved for non-EU citizens who have the need to gain diploma attend instructional courses in Italy. Although this data may also includes descendants of immigrants, there's still a substantial portion of Chinese residents that travelled from a country which is thousands of miles away in the hope of pursuing advanced studies.

It's predictable that this number will keep growing in the near future since studying abroad is encouraged also by Chinese government -- in recent years, the Ministry of Education of China initiated a major project for talent development in which the significant role of promoting non-English languages SA program and developing a more comprehensive coverage of talents of as more FLs as possible (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Besides, it's worth noting that Italian as a FL has never been included as an optional language subject in the system of Gao Kao as English, French, Japanese, German and Spanish. In other words, for students who aim at participating in College Entrance Exam, motives for learning Italian would possibly be less test-oriented. For prospective students who wish to receive formal instruction of Italian at Chinese public universities, their options are still quite limited. Up till 2012, there were 15 universities that were capable of offering professional courses of Italian in China (Embassy of People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2012). Even though it seemed to be a substantial amount, but firstly, not all of them offered courses on an annual base; secondly, the amount of enrolled students each year was not comparable with other non-English majors such as Japanese, German and French. Meanwhile, the scale of private schools and online platforms that offer courses of Italian for gradually has expanded thanks to the growing demand of overseas study market in China and people's growing interests towards non-English language education and the language itself (Duoqing Capital, 2019).

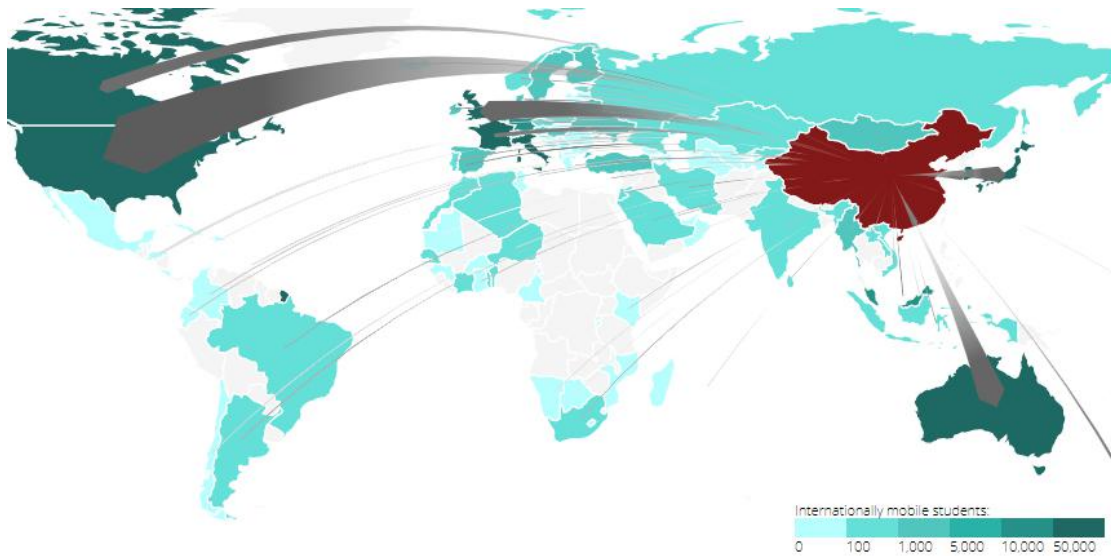


Figure 2.1 Student’s mobility from China (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019)

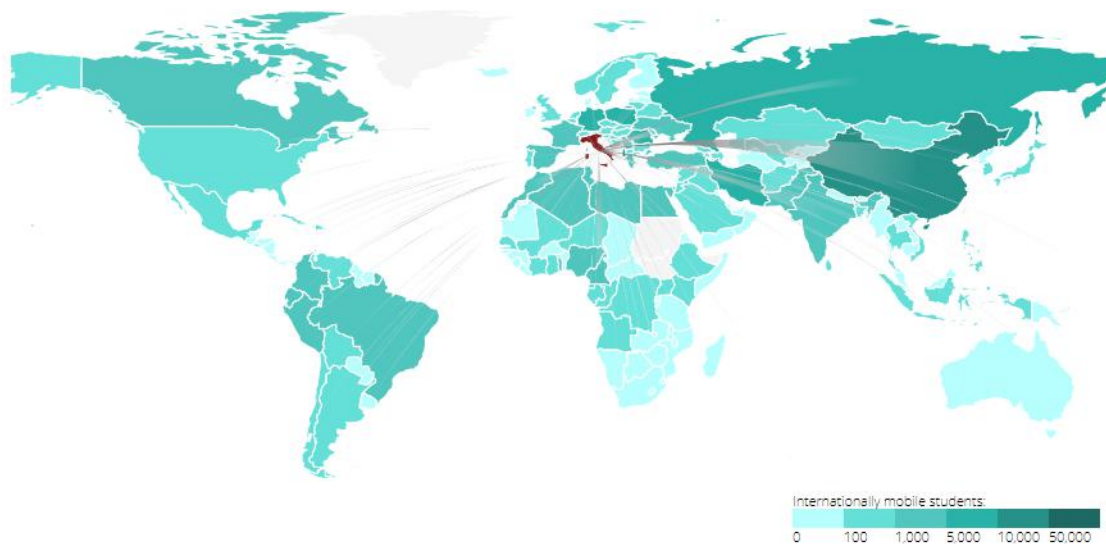


Figure 2.2 Student’s mobility to Italy (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019)

Due to the limited educational resources of Italian in AH context, learners who seek to more efficient way of acquiring Italian may opt to study Italian through various SA programs. In fact, SA programs designed exclusively for Chinese students have been brought in practice for around 15 years on the territory of Italy. In the next section, the author will briefly introduce the actuality and criticisms of these Italy-China collaborated language programs.

## 2.2 Existing SA programs of Italian

Collaborative overseas study programs that facilitate the mobility of Chinese university students towards Italy have been carried out for more than a decade. After a brief introduction to two existing SA programs of Italian for Chinese learners, the author will draw lessons from collected criticisms on the implementation and drawbacks of these SA programs in the past 15 years.

### 2.2.1 “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programs

Nowadays, Chinese students can have access to Italian tertiary-level educations by means of participating in various collaborative SA programs established by Italian and Chinese government: for instance, exchange study programs, ordinary selection procedure for international students (“Contingente Ordinario”, ordinary quota), “Marco Polo” project and “Turandot” project. In principal, students enter in Italy through the last three modalities (Uni-italia, 2021).

In 2006, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Italy implemented a previously reached agreement that simplifies the issuance of study visa and the application of Italian universities for Chinese prospective students. The program, named after the well-known Italian explorer Marco Polo, enables the entrance into Italy about 10 months ahead of the enrollment of university on condition that candidates reached required proficiency of Italian (i.e. B1/B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) after at least 10 months of language instruction in Italy. Three years later, a similar programme “Turandot” for AFAM (Alta Formazione Artistica, Musicale e coreutica), namely Italian higher education of art, music and dancing, opened up recruitment to Chinese students (Cecchetti, 2017; Uni-italia, 2021).

Both programs served not only as the solution to the shortage of Italian teaching resources in China, but also student-friendly policy, have actually attracted more and more Chinese students in the past 15 years. According to the latest report on from Uni-italia (2021), the number of Chinese applicants of Marco Polo and Turandot

demonstrates a general increment with fluctuations caused by variables such as checked availability of university enrollment quota both in China and Italy and the uncertainty caused Covid-19 emergency (see Figure 2.3). The report also points out the significant contribution of two programs on bringing in unprecedented flow of Chinese students in Italy. On the one hand, it has been witnessed 270% rise of applicants for both programs (data collected from academic year 2009/2010 to academic year 2020/2021); on the other hand, Italian institutions have also demonstrated a growing cooperative intention: it's reported that in 2005 there were only 32 institutions took part in the Marco Polo project, while currently both programs embrace 65 universities, 108 institutions of AFAM and even 15 high schools.

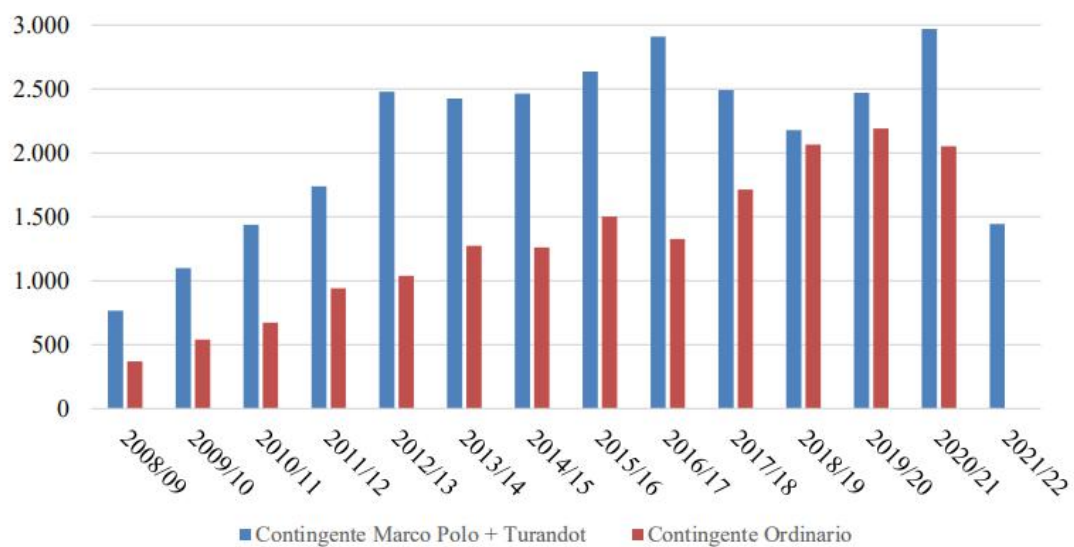


Figure 2.3 Number of Chinese students from Marco Polo and Turandot programs V.S. Number of Chinese students from “Contingente Ordinario” (Ordinary Quota) (Uni-italia, 2021)

Among the 600 surveyed subjects in 2020, more than half of these students (54%) came to Italy through Marco Polo and Turandot programs, while 43% students applied for the Contingente Ordinario (ordinary selection), in which 19% of applicants chose university courses taught in Italian. Same as the other two programs,

the Contingente Ordinario allows students to enroll in Italian universities but with higher requirement on language competences. In the case of choosing courses taught in Italian, the minimum level of Italian is B2.

After 15 years of implementation and practices of Marco Polo and Turandot programs, the cooperation between China and Italy on the level of education seems to have had an auspicious start. Both parts have realized the importance of actively promoting the dissemination of cultures and languages between two countries, by encouraging overseas study, exchange programs, mobility of students and collaborative agreements between more schools and universities (Consolato Generale d'Italia Chongqing, 2017). Along with the advantageous policy and stable state-to-state relations, there is still upside potential in the international student market to be explored in the near future. Nevertheless, the exclusive language support and the actual operation of two programs has also been criticized by language instructors and scholars for various reasons. The next section will concentrate on some prominent issues.

### 2.2.2 Criticisms on two programs

Criticisms that rain down on the Marco Polo and Turandot programs are mainly focus on three aspects: regulations, administrative operation and language teaching. Established standards of Chinese students' eligibility -- total points of Gao Kao and Italian proficiency -- are blamed to be relatively low for entering . In academic year 2009/2010, minimum grades of Gao Kao required by the Marco Polo program was 380/750. Even though lately the standard has been risen to 400/750, it seems reasonable to arrive to the conclusion that the program does "set the bar low" in terms of candidates' academic performance, considering the criteria of cut-off points at different rankings in China and the fact that the full mark is 750 (Rastelli, 2010b). Nevertheless, the truth is that the grades of Gao Kao can not reflect and assess one's learning ability or knowledge in all aspects but estimates the situation of one's store of knowledge after years of exam-oriented instruction. As a product that born within a

specific educational and cultural context, it's liable to lose validity and reliability when used as indicator of one's academic competence in another totally different educational system. The more important factor that "threatens" the quality of overseas study is L2 proficiency. The analysis of Uni-italia (2021) confirms that 15 years after the launching of Marco Polo and Turandot programs, the real difficulty of inclusion of Chinese students does not reside in their personal abilities but in their linguistic competences.

First and foremost, the intensity and duration of L2 instruction in Italy resulted inadequate for cognitively elaborate linguistic information taught by native Italian teachers (Rastelli, 2010b). In reality, the total language instruction time has been prolonged from 6 months with 27-30 hours/week to 10 months with the frequency of 80-100 hours/month, passing from intensive modality to a milder and more distributed modality. Yet the result might still be unsatisfying in that despite of the successful attainment of B1/B2 certificate of Italian, the acquired linguistic knowledge appears insufficient for following university courses without let or hindrance.

Both programs set B1 as the mandatory level of proficiency for applying university at the end of the language learning session and B2 within the first year of study at university. In practice, however, students are excluded from the supervision of two programs as soon as they finish ten-month intensive language study. The vacancy of strict control over the latter situation impairs the authority of established rules and can possibly increase the occurrence of learning difficulty during the upcoming years of study at university. Many students investigated in the previously mentioned analysis of Uni-italia reported that the time and effort that they invested for linguistic preparation was not enough for following courses in Italian or supporting professional learning. Hence, it's the low required level for enrollment to be blamed. Confronting the description published by the Council of Europe (2020) on these three clearly divided scales of standards for B1, B2 and C1 levels, it stands to reason that students with lower proficiency of Italian would encounter great difficulty at academic study. According to CEFER, there is a watershed between C1 and B1/B2: speakers with C1-level proficiency have sufficient competences to not only



understand information-rich texts or implicit messages in FL/L2, but also use the language for area-specific and academic purposes; despite speakers at B2 level are able to grasp the general idea of complex, the acquired linguistic competences enable a rather limited use of language for professional topics within speakers' own field; speakers at B1 level, however, can understand simpler and well-structured language input and accomplish basic communicative task on familiar topics in day-to-day use of language, for example, cope with situations during trips, make a chit-chat with native speakers or generate a brief text. University studies require all students, even foreign students, to obtain professional knowledge, conduct research or produce works mobilizing linguistic skills for tasks such as academic writing. Thus the adequate proficiency for non-native students must be at least B2. German universities request C1-level proficiency and it's not a single case: many European countries require international students to obtain at least B2 level before enrollment, for instance, Spain, Greece, Hungary (Uni-italia, 2021).

Perhaps setting the minimal linguistic requirement level at B1 is a trade-off between practical issues of enhancing beginners' language proficiency to a functional level within a short time and the operability and attraction of both programs, especially when SA programs such as Marco Polo and Italian teaching are still at its infancy in China.

The complexity of problems present in practical goes far beyond the ground where reports and analyses can touch. The review on statistic reports and various research shows that the remaining problems to be solve include students' pre-departure linguistic preparation, efficacy of language teaching in SA context for Chinese students, learners' motivation for learning Italian and Italian culture, accessibility to study-related or administrative information, students' life in Italy, fabrication of false language certificate by unqualified agencies, etc.

In the hope of displaying as detailed as possible the latent difficulties of learning Italian in Italy Chinese-speaking learners may encounter during, next section will discuss variables that affect acquisition of Italian from a point of view of Chinese learners, dividing into two language learning context, i.e. AH and SA contexts.

## 2.3 Transition from L2 to FL

In the last section of this chapter, the author will lead the discussion to practical problems, or to be more specific, potential difficulties that Chinese students could probably encounter in at-home and study-abroad learning contexts. How learners' at-home language preparation, precedent learning experience and habitual learning styles influence the efficiency of studying Italian abroad and what are the limitations of SA study are the primary concerns of the following analysis.

### 2.3.1 Pre-departure AH learning context

As mentioned above, two primary ways to access formal instruction of Italian in China are by attending universities that offer programs of Italian or by appealing to private overseas education agencies that normally provide language lessons as well. In view of the restricted quota provided by public universities each year, private Italian courses become a common option among students. Especially since 2005, agencies that provided Italian teaching and study abroad services have mushroomed across the country. These private agencies, regardless of their firm sizes, are able to offer all-in-one services from language didactics, language certificate exam to assistance for visa and university application. Some competent agencies, such as Senmiao School, employ merely native speakers as language teachers in which the majority of them has years of teaching experience, speaks Chinese fluently or even works as examiners of Italian certification (CILS, CELI, CERT.IT). These services are even extended to Italy, which means students have a wider range of choice on whether attend language lessons in China or in Italy.

Hence, students' language competences and experience have already been stratified in the AH learning context. Students' language learning experiences vary on the basis of the channel through which they acquire linguistic knowledge. For instance, learners who major in Italian receive systematic language teaching that comprise various typologies of courses on grammar, culture, history, etc, with more

learning hours distributed in semesters and years; learners who attend private schools tend to experience crash-course-like modality of language learning, that is, acquiring the TL within a relatively short period. Differences between these channels embodies also in teaching resources -- opportunities to interact with native speakers, teaching materials and methodologies, instructors' competences, etc. Despite the impact of each kind of learning method can not be visualized simply by judging learners' performance at language test, it can be a significant variable for FL learning at AH context where authentic language input is scanty.

Another factor that limits language input for Chinese at-home learners is the censorship towards foreign mass media, publications and websites. In order to have access to Western websites (e.g. the "Big 4": Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter), it's necessary to use tools (i.e. the virtual proxy network, or VPN) to bypass Internet censorship. In spite of the wide choices of available tools, it's reported that there is only approximately 1-8% of Intern users in China regularly purchase products to access information from external websites (Chen & Yang, 2018). Chen and Yang also conducted a study on Internet usage of 1800 Chinese students in Beijing and revealed that nearly half of the participants did not develop the habit of browsing foreign news websites. Unfortunately, no empirical studies has been done on how this would impact Chinese-speaking learners' L2/FL acquisition. Yet, the censorship on potential FL teaching and learning materials may have effects on learning outcomes and real communication with native speakers as cultural learning and language learning are inseparable (Nejabat & Tajadini, 2018).

Consequently, limited accessibility to foreign websites in foreign language inhibit TL input in some extent in that learners' learning materials are confined to resources available on Chinese Internet, which may also lead to the underestimation or even unawareness of the importance of uncensored information outside (Chen & Yang, 2018). According to the author's personal experience as a tutor of Italian in Italy, some Chinese learners used to report that they didn't have the habit of browsing Italian news websites or Western social media and were unfamiliar with common streaming platforms where enormous amount of latent Italian learning resources are at

their fingertips. The propensity and dependence to Chinese Internet world are previously developed at AH learning context. Presumably learners' acquisition of natural language form and sociolinguistic knowledge might be obstructed in AH context, yet such status would not remain changeless as soon as learning context or students' learning habit change.

It seems too early to draw a general conclusion of exactly how and what effect learning Italian in AH context may have on Chinese learners' entire learning trajectory, perceptions of Italian and Italian culture. But it is deducible that firstly, precedent at-home FL learning experience determines not only the status of language preparation but one's learning style; secondly, the influence of cultural and political environment on language learning is not negligible; lastly, individual variables should be taken into account in order to avoid overgeneralization on entire group of diversified learners simply based on the same cultural background.

### 2.3.2 New learning environment in Italy

Learning Italian in Italy seems to be an ideal learning context since it involves language use both in authentic social and cultural environment and in classroom situations (Tragant, 2012). Nevertheless, immediate adaption to the new and in most cases, unfamiliar learning environment is not easily accomplished in an action. Going abroad is a challenging journey for students' body and mind, especially for those who have zero experience as long-distance traveller. As soon as Chinese students enter in Italy, they have to cope with a series of cumbersome matters of everyday life, for example, immigration procedures and moving. At the meantime, language learning tasks are on track as well -- students may feel overwhelmed by the different teaching methods of Italian teachers, the difficulty of learning materials all written in Italian, the fear of communicating with native speakers outside language classroom, etc.

Previous AH learning experience of FL (i.e. Italian or English, depends on whether students have already learned Italian or not) laid the foundation of both linguistic preparation and preferred learning style for the following language study

abroad. Well-prepared language skills maximize the efficacy of language learning at SA context by guaranteeing the comprehensibility of linguistic input and higher possibility of TL use. Where as the “learning shock” caused by the clash between Chinese learners’ learning style and Italian language teaching methodologies is huger hurdle to surmount.

Learners’ learning styles consist of two facets: culturally-based learning styles and personal learning styles which are respectively characterized by the tangible patterns of behavior, attitudes, beliefs or values shared by one community and individual differences. Mariani (2007) drew an analogy between learning styles and “onion layers” in order to explain the former’s composition. Figure 2.3 schematizes his four-layer model of interpretation for one’s learning style. Starting from the outermost layer, environmental preferences refer to one’s favors on time and place to study while penultimate layer describes his/her ways of perceiving input, namely divisions among visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or mix-modality learners. What follows is the layer of cognitive styles which represents one’s personal way of processing received information, ranging from an analytical extreme to the other intuitive end. Peeling off all three three layers, personality traits appear at the core of learning style, which is the most stable and least mutable part.

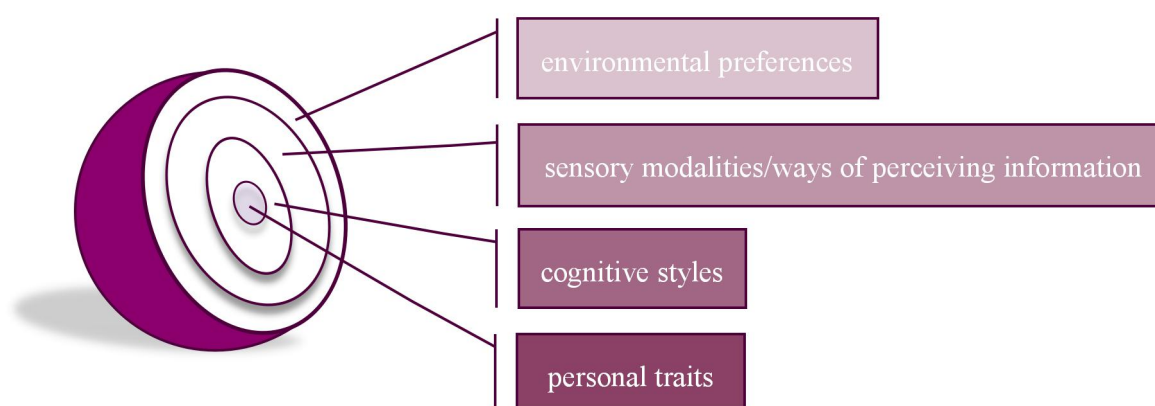


Figure 2.4 Illustration of “Onion Layer Model” according to Mariani (2007)

By this way, the interplay among individuals, cultures and learning patterns becomes clearer. As all the other learners around the world, the complexity of Chinese-speaking learners' learning styles are merged by cultural similarity and personal diversity. The conflict with Western teaching methods is actually an omnibearing challenge towards both cultural and individual aspects of their learning styles which are progressively formed growing up with other fellows.

Returning to real-life classroom scenarios, the discrepancy existing culturally-appreciated learning styles appreciated between Italian teachers and Chinese learners often turns into one of the main causes of developmental delay in terms of L2 acquisition. Nurtured by the Confucian ideology, traditionally teachers are representation of authority and speciality whom students should hold in reverence. Moreover, teachers' paternalistic figure is widely accepted as depicted in the well-known saying "even if someone is your teacher for only a day, you should regard him like your father for the rest of your life". Therefore, it's appreciated that students assume the silent passive role at class while the teacher assumes the role of lecturer. When students are in need of further explanation, they tend to not raise hands promptly but wait until the class is dismissed and ask questions in private. A Chinese student who prefers traditional lecture-like FL classroom with the solemn atmosphere and doesn't expect much interaction with teacher during lesson is likely to find communicating with native teacher "intimidating" and feel stressed studying inside an excessively interactive atmosphere, especially with language barrier.

On the one hand, as previously mentioned, FL education in China is criticized for placing so much emphasis on grammar, reading, writing and translation that the importance of simultaneously developing communicative skills is not valued and often overlooked. On the other hand, the impact of Chinese teaching methodologies for both L1 and FLs finds expression in students' learning strategies -- the so-called technique of mnemonic is highly used for memorizing vocabulary and grammatical rules (Consalvo, 2012). Interestingly, the "notorious" rote memorization without much comprehension or contextualization actually results efficient in terms of exam achievement and L1 learning (Mariani, 2007). However, when students study in Italy,

the traditional Chinese learning styles might not be appreciated or fully understood by Italian teachers. Reciprocal misconceptions thus comes about in between students and L2 instructors: Italian teachers may be frustrated by Chinese learners reticence and passivity, meanwhile students that are not accustomed to the new teaching style may find study abroad dreadful and less efficient and in the worst case, lose interest at the end of SA period. The intervention of Chinese-speaking tutors temporally alleviate the situation, yet the actual effectiveness on L2 development remains in doubt.

It's necessary to reiterate that Chinese modern education is in continuous development and the aforesaid example is to elaborate the cultural distance of teaching and learning styles that prevails in China and Italy. Despite of the personal essential of learners' learning styles, this does not mean that they keep invariant in a different learning context and with different teaching style. With the effort constantly paid by Italian teachers for optimizing inclusive language teaching, there are good grounds for believing that the current intercultural pedagogic dilemma would not last for long.

Another aspect that occupies a large proportion during L2 learners' SA period is language input outside the language classroom. The most common conduits through which one can get valid L2 input living abroad are reading/listening/watching materials in authentic language or the frequent socializing with native speakers. Thanks to the development of technology, today the accessibility to all types of videos, films, books and news becomes extremely quick and easy. Interpersonal communication also also casts off the chains of time and space then come into diversified forms. Input is everywhere as long as learners are willing to search. After-class learning can be productive as well without the guide of language teachers. Nevertheless, this seemingly simplicity of gaining information and connecting with people is a double-edged sword that may not be helpful for language learning at SA context. Still, L2 learners are able to easily access equivalent information in L1 (e.g. news, films, music, etc) and keep close contact with parents and friends at their hometown. In addition, living conditions and social preferences also determine the quantity of L2 input. It's common to see students share living places with their fellow

countrymen rather than with international students from other countries or locals and hang out more often with the group of students who speak their mother tongue. The quantity and quality of language input and opportunities for output or communicative interactions vary among SA contexts (Serrano et al., 2011). In other words, L2 exposure outside classroom depends greatly on individuals' decisions which involve several variables such as personalities, learning motivation, learners' beliefs towards TL and TC, physical environment and so on. In such complex surroundings, if SA learning is to yield positive changes in learners' L2 knowledge reserves and competences, certain conditions have to be met (Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2011).

In order to reveal the correlation between language input at SA context and learners' beliefs on TL and TL learning. The author conducts a small-scaled study to investigate how discussed variables improve or hinder Chinese SA learners' acquisition of Italian during a year abroad.



## **Chap 3 Research design and methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design and methodology that was used in current research to investigate on the extent to which Chinese-speaking students was exposed to Italian during a year of study-abroad experience and to study what are the impact of such learning experience change their perspectives on the target language. The first section of this chapter outlines the background, aim and hypothesis of the study. The second part describes the participants of the study, followed by the third section in which the research material will be introduced. The last part of this chapter will briefly detail the data collection procedure.

### **3.1 Introduction**

Whether SA context can effectively bring about a general enhancement in learners' communicative competences and acquisition of TL depends not only on in-class language instruction, but also out-of-class language use. On the strength of various findings and theories elaborated in precedent chapters, a small-scaled research was carry out with the aim of investigating Chinese overseas students' language use outside the classroom context and understanding the effect of study-abroad experience on certain aspects of students' beliefs towards Italian learning.

The original intention of current study started off due to the author's personal experience as a Chinese-speaking tutor of Italian at an Italian university. During those three months of language teaching assistance, it's witnessed that Chinese students particularly underwent certain learning difficulties in lexical development, listening comprehension and generally speaking, demonstrated low willingness of speaking in Italian at classroom. Complaints received from the part of Italian CELs ("Collaboratori ed Esperto Linguistico", i.e. language lecturers) were directed at similar aspects of L2 skills as those observed by the author. Meanwhile, a few Chinese students expressed their quandary for studying Italian was majorly caused by three factors: insufficient proficiency for effectively utilizing the available L2 learning

resources at class, scarce interactions with native speakers outside language classroom or indifferent attitudes towards language learning.

After reviewing the SA literature, the possible causes and effects of this issue become clearer. In view of the specificity of situations, current research was carried out in the hope of getting the bottom of the reality of one-year Italian learning at SA context. The research seeks to value the efficacy of SA programs, revolving around an investigation on three indicators that may elucidate as clear as possible the interaction between language learner and overseas learning context: source of language input, learners' beliefs on the SA learning and growth in L2 proficiency. Hence, two research questions were formulated:

1) *In what ways did students gain access to language exposure outside the language classroom?*

2) *How did students perceive their SA experience?*

It's hypothesized that the lack of diversified approaches to language exposure was a common phenomenon among the investigated Chinese-speaking learners, which indirectly led to a sense of disappointment about the efficacy of Italian learning within SA context.

### 3.2 Participants

The potential participants of this research were prospective students, undergraduate or graduate students from mainland China who had already completed an entire period of Italian learning in Italy. Ideally, participants were expected to come from Marco Polo program, Turandot program or exchange study.

The final group consisted of 18 Chinese-speaking randomly selected samples, of which eight were from exchange programs, eight from Turandot program and other two declared that they took part in "independent program" and "major". The majority of participants had about 9 or 12 months of Italian language courses, except the two participants from other programs had attended Italian courses for respectively 2 months and 48 months. Participants' gender was equally distributed, with nine male and nine female. Participants who came to Italy through Turandot program arrived in

2018 or 2019, while the period in which those who studied in Italy as exchange students ranged from 2013 to 2017. Even though no participants were from Marco Polo program, the diversity and distribution of samples' language education backgrounds was advantageous for research analysis.

### 3.3 Materials

A qualitative research was carried out in the form of online questionnaire. The prototype of this questionnaire derived from Tragant's (2012) quantitative study on change or stability in SA learners' perceptions. The original study contained three questionnaires designed for three different timings during participants' SA stay, inquiring changes of students' perceptions about English language, English learning, English people, linguistic and non-linguistic development as a result of SA learning.

One of the attractive features of Tragant's research method was that three questionnaires were completed in different time points during participants' overseas study period that last two semesters. In other words, three groups of data were collected respectively at the beginning of the first semester, towards the end of the first semester (with three-month interval in between) and lastly, towards the end of second semester (five months from the previous time point). The three questionnaires concerned different information of participants' SA learning experience. To be more specific, the first questionnaire asked students to rate the difficulty of various aspects of English, e.g. listening, writing, reading, speaking. Precedent English learning experience was also required at the initial stage of research. The rest of this questionnaire consisted of five questions upon participants' opinions about English people, English language, English learning, motivations for taking part in the SA program and enhancing English proficiency, all using five-level or six-level Likert scales for rating.

The assignment of second questionnaire took place after three months of study when participants had already started English learning at classroom. Basic information such as participants' living conditions, actual attended hours of formal English instruction, social contacts was collected. Again, opinions about English

language and English people were inquired. Compared with the previous questionnaire, the questionnaire at second phase concentrated on participants' roles as language learners with short-term learning experience at SA context. Participants' were asked to evaluate progress not only in listening, writing, reading and speaking, but more specific areas like vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and accent. Furthermore, participants had to scale two confirmations about language confidence and learning expectation of English, which were re-examined at the third questionnaire. L2 exposure outside classroom context was investigated through a few items regarding L1 use or habits of watching original, reading books, etc. The third questionnaire was recombined by the first two questionnaire with the purpose of assessing participants' learning beliefs, learning methods, attitudes on English language and English people, etc, at the end of SA sojourn. As a consequence, dynamics of learners' developing perceptions during became sensible through answers made at different periods.

Nevertheless, although Tragant explained that self-reported learning progress on overall proficiency could reflect development of learners' cognitive and metacognitive strategy, there are certain drawbacks associated with the use of subjective judgement as the sole reference. Firstly, it failed to give a credible feedback about the actual language growth or the impact of language exposure. Secondly, variables that could possible confuse learners' estimates were intricate -- personalities, personal criteria for proficiency levels, feedback given by the outer world and so on. By contrast, the usage of standardized FL/L2 certification seems more convincing and effective for further interpretation of research data.

For the strong pertinence to Tragant's study, a compound of the aforesaid questionnaires was adopted for current research. Certain items from the previous study were adapted for the particularity of samples. In order to ensure participation rate and operability of the current research, the questionnaire was anonymous, distributed only one time and its length was strictly controlled. In addition, all items were arranged in chronological order. Participants' data were collected in the first section with five items regarding gender and basic information about the chosen SA

programs in Italy. The second section concentrated on learners' language preparation before departure, including questions on previous Italian learning experience at domestic context and participants' certificated Italian proficiency. In the last section, a series of items were established in order to investigate participants' perceptions and learning situation at the end of their SA sojourn. Main contents of this sections can be summarized as thus: hours of formal Italian instruction offered by SA programs, certificated proficiency at the end of the study, living conditions, social life, language learning outside the classroom environment, perceptions of Italian or Italian learning and subjective evaluation on the entire learning experience. Among all these variables, participants' social activities and learning habits were given great attention due to their important roles in TL exposure.

Mixed types of measurements were adopted for the items within this section in accordance to different properties of requested data. For example, the grid utilized in Tragant's study for collecting information upon participants' social contacts was substituted with a simplified version, considering the total length of current questionnaire. Learning belief was the core of the third section, thus new items were added in order to examine the issue as thorough as possible. Participants' language growth was captured by two groups of data of certificated language proficiency (according to CFEF's standard) both before and after their SA periods. Another notable difference from Tragant's questionnaires was the measurement of students' opinions on four main L2 skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing). Participants from current study were asked to rank the difficulty of these competences rather than evaluate each aspect. In this way, it's easier to visualize and verify learners' perceptions on Italian learning difficulty.

Finally, in order to facilitate the completion of questionnaire for Chinese-speaking participants, the ultimate version of assigned online questionnaire was translated from English into Chinese by the author on the premise of retaining items' original English meanings and research objects.

### 3.4 Data collection procedure

Due to the COVID-19 emergency, the research was not able to be conducted offline in a face-to-face way as expected. Therefore, the questionnaire was published online in December 2020 through Wenjuanxing, one of the most popular crowdsourcing platform for research data collection in mainland China. In addition, the questionnaire was also available on the biggest messaging and social-media application -- WeChat. After three months of data collection, 18 valid questionnaires were received from Chinese students located in China, Italy and Australia. Averagely, participants spent approximately 6.3 minutes to complete the questionnaire. According to the analysis on the source of, all 18 received answer sheets derived from WeChat, which implied that certain participants were possibly from the author's network of acquaintances. Still and all, participants' Italian language education backgrounds didn't exhibit excessive homogeneity because of the unicity of data sources.

## Chap 4 Analysis and results

### 4.1 Data analysis

Research data will go through two rounds of analyses in order to obtain sufficient information for later discussions. Prior to data management and analysis, responses for each item will be integrated and analyzed independently without associating with respondents' profiles. Initially, general analysis was carried out on participants' background information: Italian learning profiles of 18 participants and growth in Italian proficiency. Next, analysis will be focus principally on two segments in correspondence with the research questions:

1) L2 exposure and social contacts at SA context (*In what ways did students gain access to language exposure outside the language classroom?*)

In this section, data extracted from items 14-16 which related to participants' living conditions or social contacts and language used to communicate with others were adopted for further analyze on L2 exposure at SA context, along with items 20-25 which also reflected L2 use out of Italian language classroom, e.g. watching films, reading news, hanging out with native speakers, etc.

2) Learners' perception of SA learning experience (*How did students perceive their SA experience?*)

Items in question 17-19 and 26-27 concern with the Individuals' opinions on TL, TL learning and TC. Thus, corresponding responses were sorted according to categories listed in the sheet below.

Table 4.1

Category	Description of the item
<i>Perceptions about L2 and the learning of L2</i>	a. In general, what was your opinion about the Italian language when you stayed in Italy? b. Rank four language aspects (listening, speaking, reading, writing) according to your perception of their levels of difficulties. c. I didn't feel comfortable speaking in Italian. d. There's no need to reach native-like fluency in order to

	understand other non-language courses.
<i>Opinions on formal L2 instruction in classroom</i>	a. I preferred learning Italian with Chinese-speaking professors. b. Attending language lessons is enough for me to learn Italian. c. I believed most of the improvement was obtained outside of the language classroom.
<i>Attitudes on Italian learning at SA context</i>	a. My communicative competence improved quickly in this period. b. Thanks to SA experience, I understood better Italian grammar than before. c. Hanging out with native speakers actually won't help much on language learning. d. How would you qualify this language learning experience on the scale of 1-10? e. Reflecting your entire trajectory of Italian learning, would you consider it as a turning point?

Different from the first round of data analysis, questionnaires would be reclassified at current procedure on the basis of informants' profiles, scilicet participants' pre-departure Italian proficiency, frequency of contacts with native speakers and learning motivation. The second round of analysis aimed at finding the correlations between learners' perceptions and two variables that influence SA learning results (i.e. threshold level and L2 use outside classroom). Therefore, all 18 questionnaires were selected in line with the following taxonomies:

Table 4.2

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Standard of classification</b>
<i>Language preparation at AH context</i>	Beginner level: no precedent language preparation; A1-A2; Intermediate level: B1-B2; Advanced level: C1-C2.
<i>Language exposure outside classroom</i>	Based on the spectrum of participants' interactions with NSs and extended out-of-classroom language learning, a continuum that ranges from high L2 exposure to low L2 exposure is created. The continuum measures principally the use of Italian in daily life. For example, samples that belong to high L2 exposure group need to meet at least one of the following conditions: 1) Italian is the language of communicate with cohabitants; 2) having minimum two



	Italian-speaking social contacts with whom he/she frequently interacted during SA period.
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After classification, answers on learners' beliefs will undergo the same data sorting procedure as in the second step of the previous round of analysis in the hope of figuring out whether certain patterns existed respectively between the two variables and learners' perceptions on SA learning context.

## 4.2 Research results

The following section presents the research results obtained by two types of data analyses. The first part begins with a general analysis on all 18 questionnaires by sorting out students' responses on different items. With the help of various diagrams, the dynamics of Italian learning at AH and SA contexts are thoroughly illustrated. The second part probes into the correlation between Italian learning and two important variables, i.e. language preparation at AH context and language exposure at SA context. Questionnaires are again divided into different groups in order to investigate separately the variables and their consequences. Together the results from two rounds of data analyses provide different insights into the issue of SA learning.

### 4.2.1 General analysis

According to the received responses on Italian learning history before the beginning of Italian courses in Italy, there was only one informant from the Turandot program went abroad without any language preparation -- the remaining 17 students had all learned Italian as a FL in the AH learning context by attending formal Italian instruction provided by universities (64.71%), learning Italian online (11.76%) or attending Italian courses offered by private agency (25.53%). Studying Italian with the help of language instructors appeared to be the one and only composition of Italian learning experience for the majority of respondents, except for three students

who previously had access to Italian learning opportunities thanks to overseas programs or part-time job as tour guide for Italian-speaking tourists.

Another group of data that reflects students' pre-departure language preparation is Italian proficiency. Except the 33.33% of respondents who didn't possess Italian certification before SA learning experience, the remaining two third of responses demonstrated certain degree of diversity regarding students' degrees of acquisition. Half of the group with language certifications had reached intermediate level (B1 or B2) of Italian before SA sojourn. Italian language proficiency of the six remaining students equally distributed at beginner level (A1 or A2) and advanced level (C1 or C2). An interesting correlation between students' sources of FL learning and their linguistic competences was found -- all advanced learners came from the most "orthodox" language education system, namely courses provided by Chinese universities, while most abecedarians came into contact with the TL at AH context through online language teaching. Besides, the six intermediate-level students had studied Italian at either private language agencies or universities.



Figure 4.1 Modalities of Italian learning at AH context and Italian proficiency improvement at SA context

A Sankey diagram (see Figure 4.1) was adopted to visualize firstly the correlations between various modalities of Italian learning in China and students' pre-departure language levels and then the flows of language proficiency development at two different time points. As Figure 4.1 shows, significant language level upgrade from one level to another wasn't a common case among the investigated students after a SA period -- there were only 3 students improved their language proficiency at the end of the study programs. None of these three learners were from the group of advanced learners before the SA sojourn. Language improvement on the five participants who didn't take part in any language test at both time points was thus unable to find out.

Several sources for error were found during the investigation on participants' weekly Italian learning hours at SA context. It was not possible to remedy the evident problematic data collected from item 10 (*How many hours a week do you have class, including all courses or tutoring given in Italian?*) and item 11 (*Approximately how many hours a week did you attend the class?*). Theoretically, numerical values of answers for item 11 should be no bigger than those from the item 10. However, several participants' responses demonstrated either erroneous or exaggerated. Therefore, correspondent data was discarded for potential risk of unpreciseness and non-authenticity. Reasons could be attributed to misinterpretation on the part of respondents, the misleading sequence setting or placement of two items. Even though participants from the Turandot program normally need to finish 10 months of language study in Italy, the intensity of Italian instruction that participants actually received in Italy remained unclear. Fortunately, the missing data on this factor didn't create serious impact on general analyses, considering that significant linguistic improvement was found in merely three samples and no direct correlation with total L2 learning hours at SA context appeared.

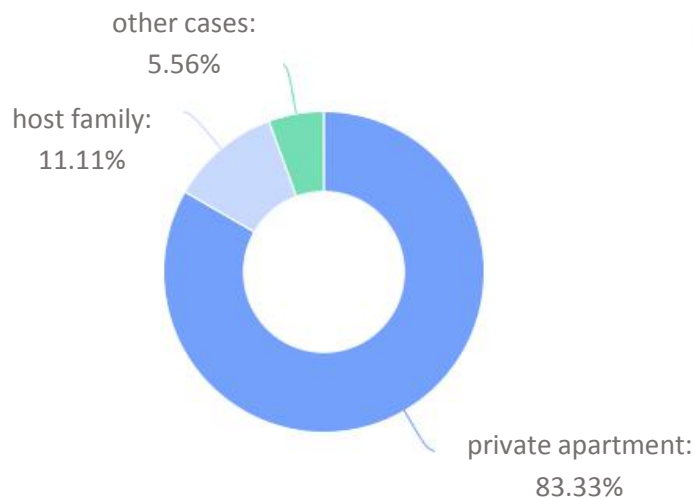


Figure 4.2 Places of living in Italy

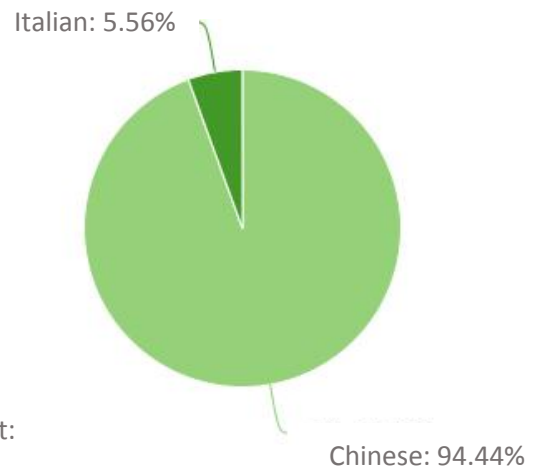


Figure 4.3 Language used for communicating with cohabitants

Figure 4.2 provides an overview of students' living conditions in Italy -- the majority of them (15 out of 18) rented private apartments while two students lived with host families and one had a short-term accommodation. Places of residences often provide useful information on language use at one of the most important scenarios at SA learning context, as students normally tend to spend a great part of time at their dwellings. Data from other items further completed the understanding of these learners' living conditions. It can be seen from Figure 4.3 that almost all participants used L1 to communicate with cohabitants with the exception of one student who had chances to use Italian even at his/her apartment. Therefore, most students still lived with Chinese-speaking roommates or host families even in Italy. Further analysis on students' frequent contacts in Italy revealed the extent to which they used Italian to communicate with native speakers. Participants were required to write down information about three people with whom they contacted most frequently during the SA experience, including frequency, relationship and language spoken between them. All 18 participants used the words "often" or "everyday" to describe the frequency of interaction they had with the people topped the list of contacts. Not surprisingly, 16 of them had most contacts with Chinese-speaking roommates, classmates, friends or boyfriend, whereas the rest of two respondents respectively

reported that they interacted continually with Italian-speaking teacher and foreign friend.

Table 4.3

	<b>description of frequency</b>	<b>Relationship (number)</b>	<b>language spoken</b>
1	everyday, often	roommate (9), classmate (4), friend (2), boyfriend (1)	Chinese
		teacher (1), friend (1)	Italian
2	everyday, often, sometimes, three times a week, seldom	roommate (3), classmate (4), friend (3)	Chinese
		teacher (1), classmate (4), girlfriend (1), friend (1)	Italian
		friend (1)	Chinese and Italian
3	everyday, often, sometimes, three times a week, once every two or three months, normally, it depended	classmates (3), roommate (1), agent (1)	Chinese
		family member (1)	Chinese dialect
		teacher (7), language partner (2), landlord (1), barista under house (1)	Italian
		friend (1)	English

The table above shows some of the main characteristics of students' social contacts in Italy. First and foremost, L1 was more frequently used for socializing with acquainted objects than L2. For example, Chinese was reported mostly spoken to roommates, classmates, friends and family members. More than half of the respondents' frequent contacts were all Chinese speakers. Italian-speaking acquaintances were ranked mostly at the third place of the list -- about 61.11% of participants had listed one native speaker as the third frequent contact in Italy, despite that some of these native speakers, such as landlord and barista, might contributed little to students' L2 use in everyday life. In fact, 33.33% informants reported that they never took initiative to find opportunities to practice Italian with NSs outside classroom and only 27.78% of them (5 out of 18) participated extracurricular activities that provided chances to communicate with NSs. Informants from the latter case indicated that the activities were attending specialized courses, sitting in on

university lessons, interacting with Italian friend or language exchange partner. When participants were asked if they kept in touch with their “Tandems”, namely voluntary language exchange partners designated by Italian universities, more than half of them reported that they did not.

In addition to interpersonal communication, SA students can have access to L2 input by means of movie watching, book or news reading. According to answers collected from items 20-22 (see Figure 4.4.1-4.4.3), a great amount of Chinese students used to watch films and read novels in Italian. In order to further investigate these students’ familiarity with Western streaming media platforms, they were asked to report how they usually gain access to original movies. Among fourteen valid responses, eight students mentioned YouTube while YYeTs (one of the most popular Chinese fan-subtitled websites for foreign films) was ranked for the second place, nominated by five students. Cinema was also one of the most important channels for having access to original films. Other methods mentioned were Raiplay, Baidu Wangpan (a popular Chinese Cloud service platform where resources are easily retrievable and shareable), Netflix, CD and television. What calls for special attention is that it’s very common to find original movies with Chinese/bilingual subtitles on Chinese platforms, whereas Western streaming media platforms usually provide films without any subtitles or with monolingual subtitles. Actually, respondents demonstrated more preference to the latter which is convenient and easily accessible in the SA learning context. As for those who still stuck to the old habit of searching foreign movies on Chinese websites, motives could be language difficulty, personal choice or unimpeded accessibility of these websites abroad as well. Besides, the use of Internet for movie watching exceeds the traditional ways by a big margin. Putting aside the impact of pandemic, these Chinese students’ capacity of obtaining online resources mirrors exactly the impact of technology on FL/L2 learning. Handling novels written in original language is not as easy as rolling off a log for non-native language learners. Surprisingly, half of the participants reported to have read at least one novel in Italian that was not required by their language courses. However, only 16.67% of participants declared that they frequently read news written in Italian

during the period of study. Thus, students' out-of-classroom L2 input outside language through constant reading remains open to doubt.

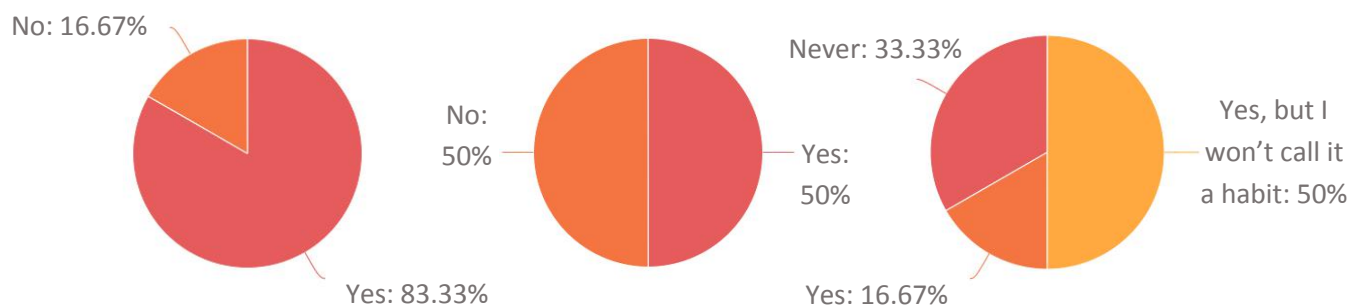


Figure 4.4.1  
Did you watch any film/TV series in Italian?

Figure 4.4.2  
Did you read any novel in Italian that were not required by the curriculum?

Figure 4.4.3  
Did you have the habit of reading news in Italian?

The data of participants' interests towards TL reveals that half of the participants found Italian language complex or very complex to learn. In particular, one respondent qualified that "after seven years of study, I still find Italian too difficult to learn" and another added that Italian was "harder than English". Participants were then required to sort the difficulty of acquiring the four language competences. In general, synthetical rankings show that speaking was the most difficult ability to gain according to participants, followed by listening, writing and reading. Separately analyzing answers from all 18 questionnaires, each position of the ranking demonstrate particular pattern. In other words, the most chosen language aspect for the first place was actually writing, whereas listening was the most chosen ability for the second place. Reading comprehension was unanimously agreed to be least difficult by these Chinese-speaking learners of Italian. Even communicative competence was regarded as the most difficult skill to enhance, participants who felt comfortable using Italian to communicate and those who disagreed with this statement broke even. It seems that most of the students' will to speak in Italian would no be fully confined or undermined by the difficulty of acquiring colloquial Italian. In terms of L2 listening skill, 55.56% of participants agreed that it's not necessary to reach native-like fluency in order to understand university courses taught in Italian.

This could partially explain the reason why not all participants ranked it as the most challenging aspect to learn. Unlike language output, i.e. writing and speaking, the ability of listening largely relies on comprehension of vocal input, which requires less sensitivity and knowledge about language structure or vocabulary as they can be compensated by the ability to infer the meaning of input. Besides, especially if the comprehension of vocal message in Italian happens at contexts such as language classroom or university lecture where students are given time and patience or even not required to offer immediate feedback, the perceived difficulty of listening aspect may decrease.

According to the data collected from respondents' opinions towards formal Italian instruction at SA context, the majority of them seem to be fond of or at least, be satisfied with Italian language instructors' pedagogic methodologies -- only two students agreed that they preferred learning Italian with Chinese-speaking professors. What is particularly noteworthy that 50% of participants were unsure about this statement. One of the reason could be that some of the respondents had never attended Italian language lessons taught by Chinese teachers at AH context. Although 66.67% of participants expressed their disagreement on the opinion that attending solely classroom instruction was sufficient for learning Italian, only 27.78% agreed that their language improvement was obtained inside language classroom. Similarly, other 27.78% affirmed that they enhanced language proficiency thanks to the opportunities of language use and the endeavors they invested out of the classroom. Still, the remaining 50% of the participants didn't take any side with regard to this issue. Therefore, the existing data was too ambiguous to draw a definite conclusion within few lines on students' perceptions about learning Italian at SA classroom. But it seems pretty clear that most of the subjects in this study were not repelled by their classroom learning experience abroad.

Generally speaking, participants did not hold strong opinion towards the efficacy of learning Italian inside or outside language classroom in the previous group of data. Hence, the following analysis on their beliefs about SA learning experience may reflect the impact of SA context on the acquisition of Italian to certain extent. 72.23%



of participants affirmed that their oral skills was improved quickly during their SA sojourn and analogously, 72.22% of participants reported they gained better understanding on Italian grammar thanks to overseas study. The advantage of socializing with native speakers on language acquisition was also approved by most of the participants (77.78%) and no one disagreed with such statement. What seems certain is that studying Italian abroad did have positive effect on the development of language skill for most Chinese-speaking students. Furthermore, students did recognize the benefits of SA context, namely larger exposure to L2 input and more chances for L2 use. Reflecting the entire trajectory of Italian learning, including precedent learning experience at AH context, 88.89% of the participants considered the learning period in Italy as a critical turning point. At the end, students were asked to evaluate of SA learning experience on the scale from 1-10. Final results show that the average value is approximately 7.61 which is objectively favourable score. There were 55.56% of the respondents fall into the section of 7-8 while 27.78% of them graded 9 or 10 for their learning experience. In particular, one student rated his/her SA experience extremely low, as can be seen from Figure 4.5. It's necessary to further investigate student's profile in order to figure out possible cause.

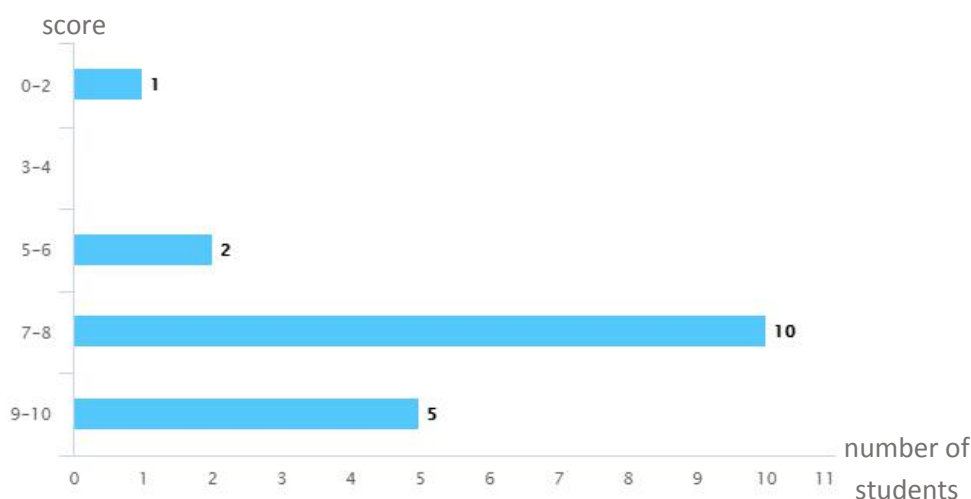


Figure 4.5 Students' evaluation on their SA learning experience

#### 4.2.2 Individual analysis

In this section, all samples were firstly selected and sorted on the basis of pre-departure language proficiency level. Six participants were excluded from the data analysis since they didn't provide certificated Italian proficiency level in the questionnaire. The composition of three levels of students. Therefore, the composition of this group of participants are listed as below:

Table 4.3

	<b>Italian level</b>	<b>Serial number of participant</b>
<i>Group A</i>	A1-A2	No. 8, 9, 11.
<i>Group B</i>	B1-B2	No. 2, 3, 4, 6, 15, 16.
<i>Group C</i>	C1-C2	No. 1, 5, 18.

##### *Group A*

Two participants (No. 8 and 9) from group A had learned Italian in China through online courses, in which participant No. 8 had already had learning experience in Italy before the current SA sojourn. Meanwhile, another participant (No. 11) didn't respond to the question. The frequent contacts of all these three participants were mostly Chinese-speaking friends, roommates or classmates, except for participant No.9 who had an Italian-speaking girlfriend. They all deemed Italian difficult to learn and recognized the fact that communicating with NSs outside the classroom and Italian instruction within the classroom both contribute positively to language improvement. In practice, the ways in which students interact with out-of-classroom L2 resources doesn't demonstrate diversity. They used to watch Italian movies but didn't have the habit of constantly reading Italian news. Only one participant read novels written in Italian. All three participants expressed their uncomfortableness when they had to speak in Italian with others, which may be related to the low language proficiency. In terms of language use, participants No.9 and 11 reported that they did actively search for opportunities to interact with native speakers but at the same time, neither of them took part in extracurricular activities which provided opportunities to practice Italian

or kept in touch with any language exchange partner. Still, among these three participants, two of them (NO. 8 and 9) were able to upgrade their language proficiency to B1-B2 at the end of the SA period. Accordingly, they gave rather high score for the SA experience, respectively 7 and 8 points. Unfortunately, participant No. 11 didn't gain any improvement with regard to certificated Italian level. This could be the reason why he rated his learning experience for 1 score. His Italian learning process in AH and SA contexts reveals that other factors that lead to such dissatisfaction could be the absence of pre-departure language preparation and social habits. For example, this participant had never attended any Italian courses or even learned Italian through self-study before coming to Italy. He did almost everything with his Chinese-speaking classmate. He used to watch Italian movies from YYeTs, but never read news or novels in Italian. Although he was firm in his belief the importance and efficacy of attending Italian course and talking with native speakers outside the classroom, the only Italian-speaking person with whom he had frequent contact was the teacher. Except the Italian teacher, he didn't have contact with other NSs. An intriguing fact is that this participant actually admitted that his communicative skills and grammar knowledge were improved thanks to the SA learning experience. Perhaps the perceived language development was not sufficient to make significant change in the Italian certification test and as for the major cause of his poor evaluation on SA experience may go beyond the scope of current investigation.

### *Group B*

The group of B1-B2 proficiency consists of six participants who had all learned Italian in China through private agencies or at universities. Compared with the previous group, participants from group B tended to have more frequent social contacts with Italian speakers. Two participants considered Italian as a complicated language to learn, whereas other six participants didn't find Italian particularly difficult. The data from students' perceptions of Italian learning demonstrates that they were generally more positive about learning results obtained at SA context -- all

of them agreed that their grammar skill was improved and only one student were not sure about her growth in oral competence. Participants also exhibit more confidence as L2 learners when they needed to communicate in Italian. Almost all participants recognized the importance of L2 classroom instruction and preferred Italian teachers' teaching styles. According to the evaluation on Italian learning experience in Italy, six students uniformly scored their experience higher (from 7 to 9 points, the average value is 8.33) than the previous group which ranges from 1 to 8 points with the average of 5.33 points.

As for learning habits outside classroom, the current group does not seem to be more active or consistent in watching original movies, reading novels and news than group 1. The data on these six participants' outdoor socializing habits shows the same pattern as previous group, in that even though the majority of participants were agreed with the benefits of interacting with native speakers and were willing to seek out opportunities for more L2 use, only one participant were keeping in touch with language partner and the way in which the other two students who were able to frequently communicate with NSs was by attending additive courses at Italian universities.

Participant No. 4 was the only one whose Italian proficiency leveled up at the end of her SA program. She used to attend Italian language courses at university and work as part-time tour guide for Italian-speaking tourists in China. Reviewing her learning and socializing activities outside classroom, it's surprising that this participant was not particularly proactive at expanding her range of reading or seeking out chances to communicate with NSs. Moreover, she was the only one among the group that didn't considered the SA learning experience as a turning point of Italian learning trajectory. This finding somehow coincides with the one in the study of Tanaka and Elli's (2003) in which they revealed that the changes in learners' belief had no relationship with their proficiency improvement. Still, participants No. 4 should be considered as a special individual case because the other participants didn't redo the certification examination of Italian before the end of SA sojourn.

### *Group C*

The last group of participants had already reached advanced level of Italian before going abroad. All three participants learned the TL at university. Despite of the high achievement, participants No. 1 and 18 still thought that Italian was a very complicated language. Their living conditions and characteristics of frequent contacts in Italy were similar to group B, that is, they lived with compatriots and did most of the daily activities with Chinese-speaking acquaintances.

Differences reside in language exposure out of classroom -- all three students read Italian novels or news and watched movies via cinema or television and Western streaming media platforms like YouTube, Raiplay and Netflix. Although they didn't participate in extracurricular activities that involved native speakers, two of them continually kept in touch with language exchange partners and same as participants from other groups, they were open to the opportunities of interacting with Italian-speaking objects.

The SA programs seem to produce positive effect on learners' beliefs since the average score of their final evaluation on their learning experience comes second on the list at 7.61 points. All three participants considered the SA period as a turning point for their Italian learning process.

Putting together the data extracted from group A, B and C, it becomes clearer the role that pre-departure language preparation may play in changing SA learning results or learners' perceptions on SA learning experience. Well-prepared students, namely those who had higher Italian proficiency before coming to Italy, tend to be more successful at taking full advantage of the language resources at SA context and be more satisfied with such learning experience. On the contrary, students at beginner level are liable to sense apprehension when they use L2, especially outside the familiar classroom environment where language instructors can no longer help. Furthermore, lower language proficiency renders communications or even establishment of friendship between learners and NSs particularly difficult. Another advantage of learning language abroad is that a great quantity of learning materials

such as Italian films or texts are at students' disposal. However, these learning materials could be too difficult for language beginners to comprehend. The accessibility of equivalent information in L1 may also contribute to learners' dependence on the use of L1 for L2/FL learning.

As the impact of SA learners' threshold level on their learning beliefs and L2 development has been reasoned, the following section will continue the investigation on another focus of current study -- the influence of language exposure at SA context. Before starting, it's necessary to briefly recap the methodology and standard adopted for data analysis and management in this section. After observing all students' socializing habits and L2 learning habits outside classroom, two factors were selected to serve as the indicator of language exposure outside classroom: 1) language used for the communication with cohabitants and 2) composition of frequent social contacts. Participants are therefore sorted into three groups as the table below.

Table 4.4

	<b>Description of the group</b>	<b>Serial number of participant</b>
<i>Group 1</i>	Italian is the language used for interaction with cohabitants or the participant at least two Italian-speaking social contacts with whom he/she frequently interacted.	No. 6, 9, 13, 17.
<i>Group 2</i>	Chinese is the language used for interaction with cohabitants and the participant have at least one Italian-speaking frequent contact.	No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18.
<i>Group 3</i>	Chinese is the language used for interaction with cohabitants and the participant have only non-Italian-speaking frequent contacts.	No. 1, 7, 8, 15.

Four participants (No. 6, 9, 13 and 17) are categorized as group 1, namely the group with highest possibility and accessibility of L2 exposure in daily life. For instance, participants No. 6 lived with NS(s) in a private apartment during her exchange program in Italy. More than that, she had two frequent contacts, a friend and her professor, who were both speakers of Italian. Although other three participants lived together with Chinese-speaking roommates, they had at least two close social

contacts who were Italians. Group 3 stands in sharp contrast to group 1 in that the social circles of the participants from group 3 included plainly compatriots. The extent to which participants from group 2 were exposed to Italian is categorized as “intermediate” level. In other words, according to their lists of three frequent contacts, they did acquaint themselves with NSs, but the frequency of interactions was considered relatively low.

Even that no correlation between language exposure and proficiency level or improvement is found, participants’ language educational backgrounds vary within each group. Hence, the focus of current data analysis is learners’ perceptions.

The four students from group 1 exhibits more certitude with regard to growth in L2 communicative skills at SA learning context than the other two groups. However, as the group with more chances to receive language input, three out of four participants did not agree that they attained L2 improvement from the outward language environment. In other words, formal instruction might still play a key role for the acquisition of Italian during their stay in Italy.

Moreover, group 1 was the most proactive group in terms of the participation rate and diversity of extracurricular activities. Three participants reported that they managed to explore opportunities for interactions with NSs by taking other non-required courses at university or hanging out with “Tandem”. As it has just been mentioned, the degree of language exposure does not relate to learners’ proficiency neither before nor after SA sojourn. Two participants that had taken Italian certification tests respectively belonged to beginner level and intermediate level before departure and only the linguistically lower-level student improved his L2 proficiency from A1-A2 to B1-B2. Yet, all participants of group 1 also reported less uneasiness experienced when they had to produce language output in Italian. At this point, it’s probably safe to conclude that learners’ language confidence is imputable to not only language preparation, but learners’ frequent use of L2 in various real-life scenario. The average score of SA learning experience of group 1 (9 points) outdistances other two groups (7 and 7.75 points). Apart from the discovery of two groups of positive correlations -- 1) between L2 exposure and learners’ confidence in

language use; 2) between L2 exposure and learners' perceptions towards SA experience, no other between-group variances were found in current part of data analysis.

### 4.3 Discussions and limitations

Closing the current chapter of research report, the last section will be divided into two parts in which final discussions on the findings and their implications will be present by first, followed by reflection on research's setbacks and directions for future work.

#### 4.3.1 final discussions and implications

Prior SA studies have stressed the correlation between threshold level and TL use outside classroom environment could produce on acquisition and learners' beliefs at SA learning context. Therefore, the current study set out with the aim of assessing the general situations of Chinese-speaking students' L2 exposure during the sojourn in Italy and their perceptions about SA learning experience.

A total number of 18 Chinese learners who had experience in studying Italian as L2 at Italian universities were involved in this study. Participants departed from China with diverse Italian learning backgrounds and took part in different types of SA programs in Italy. To be more detailed, before leaving their hometown, seventeen participants had received three typologies of Italian instruction through systematic language courses provided by Chinese universities, private overseas study agencies and Internet. Only one participant had never learned Italian before. A very small number of participants used to take part in other SA projects or part-time job which provided them with extra Italian learning experience at AH context. Most of them came to Italy via exchange programs or the Turandot program which both included Italian language courses given by professional language instructors. Participants' pre-departure Italian proficiency scattered in different levels, from the lowest beginner level to advanced level, ignoring six participants who didn't take proficiency



test. The data analysis on participants' attested Italian proficiency development detected only a subtle improvement on a few participants at the end of SA sojourn.

The first research question regarded the channel for gaining language exposure at study-abroad context. It was beforehand hypothesized that a scarcity of diversified approaches for L2 exposure would be found among Chinese-speaking learners. In fact, the results from participants' living conditions and frequent contacts in Italy partially confirms such hypothesis in that the social circles of a great amount of investigated subjects were mainly composed of compatriots, especially roommates, classmates and close friends. Only a few students managed to build up "meaningful" relationship with native speakers, i.e. acquaintanceship which enabled frequent interactions (for example, an Italian-speaking girlfriend or friend rather than the barista under learner's house). Be that as it may, how much can learners actually acquire from daily interaction with native speakers or other forms of L2 input is uncertain. Due to the limited language proficiency, language produced by non-native speakers is typically characterized by lower lexical diversity, that is with fewer word types (Bentz et al., 2015).

Besides the interpersonal communication, extended L2 input through movie watching or reading out of the classroom makes up a part of language exposure at SA context as well. The analysis on participants' outside-the-class learning habits in Italy revealed that most of them used to watch Italian films or read novels, but seldom did they maintain constant habits of reading news written in Italian.

Generally speaking, Chinese learners of Italian in this study exhibited limited language exposure during their stay in Italy. The means by which they obtained the access to language exposure included majorly film watching, reading, attending university courses and interacting with language exchange partners, Italian teachers, friends or classmates. In terms of learning Italian through other types of courses that are not related to Italian language, the extent to which it can contribute to language growth was discussed in Gao's (2008) research in which some of the participants reported that attending English-medium lessons were not very useful for improving their English skills. Even though the majority of the participants in current research

realized the importance of language exposure and demonstrated willingness to have access to more language input, they still demonstrated a lack of diversity in terms of the approaches to obtain learning resources or explore joint activities with native speakers.

Further investigation reveals that the principal cause of such issue may lie in L2 competence. In general, participants' with higher pre-departure language achievement were prone to expose themselves to more L2 input outside class, including interpersonal communication with NSs and continued use of L2 in different scenarios. Moreover, students who had already reached advanced level didn't exhibit dependence on accessing movie resources from traditional Chinese platforms, which demonstrates the correlation between learners' threshold levels and certain learning habits. This finding seems to be in agreement with one of Gao's (2006) findings which showed that previous FL learning experience at home country would leave trace on learners' learning strategy at SA context. Since these Chinese streaming platforms are well-known and widely used by Chinese people as a helpful tool for language learning, it's possible to assume that some of the participants in this study continued to use the old learning strategy that were familiar to them due to precedent FL learning experience in China. However, participants with advanced language proficiency (C1-C2) demonstrated different habits on platform usage for movie watching -- they accessed movie resources solely from Western websites.

It's quite easy to see why the quantity, quality and diversity of L2 exposure are closely related to acquired L2 competences and knowledge. Non-native learners who are equipped with better language preparation certainly have more possibility to take full advantage of the L2 learning resources at SA learning context. Conversely, learners with poor linguistic skills will have to face larger language barrier in situations such as dialogue with NSs or reading comprehension. Dissimilarities caused by different levels of Italian proficiency manifest not only in the degree of language exposure, but also the way students perceive their learning experience abroad. In this study, all participants from the beginner-level group reported that they felt the sense of insecurity when they were obliged to speak Italian and they all agreed

that Italian was a complicated language to learn. The lack of language confidence could be attributed to their limited linguistic and meta-linguistic skills, which might probably in return, dented or defeated their interests and courage to expand their social circle to more native speakers of Italian. The degree of satisfaction towards their overall learning experience in Italy was found to be associated with both initial language proficiency and language exposure. Two analyses on L2 preparation and L2 exposure respectively discovered two groups of correlations: 1) participants from the group with low pre-departure language proficiency were least satisfied with their experience abroad; 2) the group of participants with highest degree of exposure were most satisfied with the SA learning experience. It's necessary to mention that the composition of participants in all six groups from two analyses were not coincided. Therefore, in answer to the second research question (i.e. *How did students' perceive their SA experience?*), it is encouraging to say that findings from the research supported also the second part of the hypothesis, that is, disappointment about the language learning at SA context was caused by the peculiarity of Chinese learners' language use outside the classroom.

Chinese-speaking learners' socializing patterns in current study matched those observed in earlier studies on East-Asian SA language learners (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Yang & Lewis, 2015; Liu, 2018). Most of the students in current study lived with Chinese-speaking roommates, which greatly increased the use of L1 in their daily life. Remaining inside the community of L1 may help students better adapt to the new living and learning environment. Students from the same country tend to gather together so that they can obtain and exchange useful information in good time, steering clear of difficulties created by language barrier. The findings of this study explained the causes and impacts of social habits on learners' perceptions about their overall learning experience abroad. As one of the investigated variables (i.e. L2 proficiency and L2 exposure), participants' social contacts played a significant role in affecting their daily language use. Apart from the dominance of L1, another problem that participants encountered was the limited Italian learning outside the classroom. Although results from the questionnaires could not fully present students' out-of-class

learning activities, it was clear that extended L2 learning was interconnected with learners' linguistic competences.

Findings from other aspects of learners' perceptions on Italian and Italian learning at SA context suggested that in general, Italian was considered as a complex non-primary language for most participants. Among the four language aspects (listening, speaking, reading and writing), the most difficult resulted as speaking, followed by listening, writing and reading. More than half of the participants believed that it was unnecessary to reach native-like fluency in order to understand university courses taught in Italian. It may be the case that according to these students, academic study might not have high requirement on certain linguistic competences, for instance, speaking competence. Courses are usually taught in the form of lectures or seminars and furthermore, non-native students will have abundant after-class time at their disposal to digest those learning materials in L2.

As for learners' perceptions on Italian learning, the importance of both in-class formal instruction and out-of-class learning in the SA context was approved by the majority of participants. They also believed that after sojourning in Italy, their oral skill and grammar knowledge were enhanced. The language teaching style of Italian instructors were also applauded in that participants generally preferred learning Italian with Italian teachers to Chinese teachers. Last but not least, data from participants' opinions about the overall learning experience showed that almost all participants were satisfied with their SA learning experience which was also deemed as a critical turning point in their Italian learning trajectory.

Although these findings cannot be extrapolated to all Chinese-speaking SA learners, they may have important implications for deepening a mutual understanding between Chinese learners and instructors of Italian and perfecting the existing Italian SA programs, in particular, the Marco Polo and Turandot programs. For issues concerning language preparation at home country, raising the entrance requirement of Italian proficiency or extending the language learning period in Italy may seem to be the most effective solutions. The latter is similar to the proposal of Rastelli (2010b) on adjusting the intensity and duration of the Italian courses in Italy for two SA

programs. Besides, it is advisable to set up, both in Italy and in China, more qualified institutions that prioritize the quality of Italian teaching rather than economic benefits. Yet in practice, the realization of above-mentioned countermeasures will require endeavors from both Chinese and Italian educators and program constitutors. It's necessary for L2 instructors to understand the learning difficulties due to from Chinese learners' perspective and encourage them to gradually overcome the apprehension and insecurity during the use of L2. Assistance in housing problems and integration is indispensable for international students to better adapt to a new learning environment where non-native students may find particularly difficult blending into the social circle of native speakers because of language barrier, cultural gap and the lack of information. Last but not least, in face of the peculiarity of Chinese learners' learning difficulty, the right attitude is to see through the appearance of specific phenomenon to perceive the essence rather than escalate it into the overgeneralization on students from the same culture background.

#### 4.3.2 Limitations and suggestions for future work

It is indisputable that the current research and the research material contain several deficiencies. Special caution must be applied to the small sample size, as the findings might not be transferable to the entire group of Chinese-speaking learners of Italian. Ideally, the research should have been conducted not only online but also offline. Due to the unexpected pandemic situation, the distribution of questionnaire was completed solely through the Internet. The conditions of COVID-19 not only restrained the accessibility to a larger scale of samples, but also created disadvantages for some of the subjects investigated in the current study, who might have passed the SA period under such unusual and difficult circumstances. For example, a bunch of participants expressed their willingness to socialize with native speakers and reported to have actually taken action. Nevertheless, local restrictions on citizens' outdoor movements rendered interpersonal communication more complicated than before. As

consequence, students' beliefs on SA experience and the traditional benefits of language learning at SA context were certainly affected by the external environment.

Set aside the particularity of research background, it's important to bear in mind the possible bias in questionnaire design. The prototype of the questionnaire used for current study derived from the three questionnaires Tragant's (2012). A few changes were made in order to answer the requirement of research objectives. In practice, some of the modified items turned out to be misleading for respondents, i.e. items concerning hours of language study abroad. As the author looked deeper into the collected data, more imperfections were discovered. For instance, participants were asked to provide only their attested levels of Italian in order to obtain information on their threshold levels and language growth. However, lots of participants took the Italian proficiency test only once or even didn't do any test neither before nor after the SA sojourn. One of the reasons could be that students from Turandot program were normally required to reach B1 or B2 level for university application. For those who had already met the language requirement, there was little sense to redo the examination. Besides, as for exchange students, language certification was not obligatory at the end of the study program. These possibilities should have been taken into account during the design of questionnaire. Therefore, the findings of current research should be doubtless interpreted with scrutiny.

Questions of learners' actual language exposure were not investigated thoroughly. The current study merely scratched the surface of the issue of language use at SA context, by simply analyzing the typologies of learners' social contacts or learning habits outside L2 classroom. There is abundant room for further investigation to go into detail of SA learners' social contacts, for example, combining the LCP (Language Contact Profile by Freed et al., 2004) to have a better understanding on the exact degree of learners' L2 input. It's expected that future work would continue to explore this significant topic of SA learning and Chinese learners by concentrating on more specific aspects regarding learners' motivations, language anxiety, learning strategies, etc.

## Conclusions

As a branch of SLA research, SA research concentrates on the language learning that happens in a more specific context where the TL is spoken by the local community. Such learning context is easily associated with advantageous conditions for language learning, i.e. the richness of natural language input and a higher possibility for language use, which are difficult to meet in AH learning context. Nevertheless, the growth in L2 overall proficiency is not the corollary of studying abroad. In the literature, discussions on the efficacy of SA learning have not arrived at a unanimous conclusion because of the diversity of L2 learners and SA programs. Numerous variables may affect SA learning outcomes: learners' actual degree of exposure to the TL, learners' pre-departure language proficiency, previous learning experience, learners' motivations, personalities, length of the SA sojourn, quality of formal L2 instruction in SA context, etc. Furthermore, the lack of adequate research methodologies and comparative studies on AH and SA contexts renders the investigation of SA learning intractable. To date, no findings from previous studies can attest the superiority of SA learning context over other learning contexts at every level of L2 development.

Language learning in SA contexts is doubtless a multidimensional issue which comprises learners, external environments and learners' reactions to the external environments. Thus, summarizing its efficacy in a few lines is inappropriate and runs the risk of over-generalization. It is a common practice for researchers to select one or a modicum of linguistic or psychological aspects to observe or measure in a single study. As for language improvement, studies often found that SA learners were mostly benefited in terms of their pragmatic knowledge, lexical complexity, communicative and sociolinguistic skills. The frequency, quantity and quality of L2 input in SA contexts enable learners to explicitly and implicitly absorb a great amount of language structure, vocabularies and formulaic expressions by observing,

understanding, practicing and memorizing. Yet the growth in grammatical skills tends to be moderate at the end of SA sojourn, probably because the use of TL normally occurs in an informal context, which distract learners from focusing on grammatical structure.

The rich language resources available in the SA context may give an “illusion” that as long as learners study language abroad, they will have abundant access to authentic language input in this learning environment. Except the possibility of attending L2 courses given by professional language instructors, learners will also be immersed in a world full of natural L2 input once they step out of the classroom. Even a reticent and passive learner is unconsciously exposed to a great amount of language input.

Except the language development, SA learning experience influences certain psychological aspects of L2 learning. In a new learning environment, learners face the need to adapt not only to the unexpected amount of L2, but also to the change of their role in language learning. It is possible to explore the interactions between SA learners and learning environments by observing changes of their perspectives about L2 learning. SA studies that investigated the related issues revealed that in the process of SA learning, learners’ beliefs on TL, TC and TL language learning might undergo various transformation. Causes such as intensive exposure to the TL, constant language use or practice, individuals’ affective variables often bring about qualitative changes in students’ learning experience. The SA experience was found to have both positive effects (e.g. growth in learner independence, increasing interest towards TL) and negative effects (e.g. disappointment caused by different teaching methodologies, decreasing interest in exploring TC) on learners’ beliefs. Although learners’ perceptions cannot be adopted to directly quantify the SA efficacy, they still have the potential to serve as a crucial reference for the comprehensive assessment of SA programs.

However, an important factor that also have impact on learning outcomes is how learners avail themselves of the language resources in SA contexts. The major exposure to TL during a period of SA sojourn derives from the quality of SA



language instruction in class and learners' interactions with native speakers out of the language classroom. On the one hand, the large amount of L2 input available in SA contexts can be overwhelming for non-native learners due to its complexity. On the other hand, comprehensible input was found to benefit language development in a moderate way, whereas the more efficient comprehensible output produced by learners is prone to be limited and infrequent (Swain, 1985).

The amount of L2 input and output in SA context is hard to guarantee because students have different social habits and preferences on the use of languages. Thus, it is a recurrent scenario that SA students struggle to build meaningful contacts with native speakers. The composition of a SA group can be highly homogenous in that students from the same L1 background are often found in the same SA programs or even same classrooms. It is a very common phenomenon in the practices of Marco Polo and Turandot programs in which Chinese-speaking learners study Italian together with their compatriots. Moreover, the degree of engagement in SA contexts depends not only on learners' ability in managing L2 input and output, but also on the intrinsic characteristics of the learning contexts, i.e. physical surroundings, sociolinguistic settings and individual level of learners' contexts. Hence, even though the prominence of L1 and L2 is pre-established by each SA teaching programs and the physical environments of terminal countries, learners still have their initiatives on whether or how to take the advantage of L2 resources in the specific learning contexts. The actual effects of language exposure in SA contexts are not approved by all scholars -- discussions include diversity of language forms adopted by learners, distinctions and impacts of different types of L2 input/output, namely teacher talk, interlanguage and foreigner talk, etc.

Learners' threshold level of TL is considered as a robust predictor of their linguistic attainment in SA contexts. In other words, learners' previous language proficiency influences the following results of acquisition in new learning environment. To be more specific, an adequate amount of language preparation (i.e. normally refers to the intermediate level) guarantees learners with basic operable linguistic competences to acquire effectively new linguistic knowledge learned with

language instructors and to enhance the language use outside the class. SA learning context particularly benefits intermediate-level learners also because they have more potential room for improvement in various language aspects, comparing to advance-level students who are liable to experience the state of “fossilization” in light of grammatical skills. Thus, pre-departure language preparation is highly recommended as it provides learners with appropriate language competences to process the language input and enhance the possibility and quality of language use in SA contexts.

Individual variables that affect learning outcomes includes not only learners’ previous language education background and language proficiency, but also psychological or affective factors such as their aptitude, motivations, learning anxiety, self-regulations, etc. For instance, how students view themselves as the language learners and how their cognitive and metacognitive abilities react to new learning contexts create different results in their degrees of L2 exposure and adaptability to the unfamiliar teaching styles and learning environments. Though research on individual factors are still in development, it enables us to look into the issue of language acquisition in SA context from a more comprehensive perspective.

In the course of a few decades, the focus of SA research has been gradually extended from Western learners to those who come from East Asia and in particular, Chinese learners. However, due to the scarcity of relevant studies on Chinese SA students, it is still too soon to complete the entire picture of L2 learning in study abroad contexts. Especially in the research realm of non-English language SA learning, the involvement of Chinese-speaking subjects is even lower, because of the predetermined factor that the learner base of non-English FLs in China is relatively small. Accordingly, Chinese students have very limited access to receive formal instruction of languages like Italian, via public education system. On one side, there is limited accessibility to Italian learning resources and the immature Italian language education which is still in development; on the other side, thanks to the implementation of Marco Polo and Turandot programs, the convenience of studying at Italian universities has drastically changed the landscapes of Italian learning in

China and the amount of Chinese students in Italy. Therefore, this dissertation is focused on discussing the issue regarding Chinese-speaking learners' Italian learning at SA context.

The discussion on theoretical framework of SA language learning lays the groundwork for further investigation on the issue of Italian learning of Chinese SA learners. Cross-linguistic studies that compare Italian to Chinese suggest that the distinguished typological distance between these two language can result in a slower language acquisition in Chinese-speaking learners of Italian, especially in terms of the development of morphological and syntactic abilities. Their particular difficulties in commanding verbal conjugation or subordinate sentences within an expected time range of Italian learning, no matter in the SA or AH context, is totally imputable as these fundamental linguistic elements in Italian are absent in their mother tongue. Furthermore, typological differences between Italian and Chinese also affect learners' patterns of processing language input. Being consistent with some of the findings of SA studies on East-Asian learners, the discrepancy between the traditional FL teaching methods and those adopted in European FL education system. Learners' L1 not only implies the latent FL/L2 learning difficulties, but also a strong indicator of the cultural aspect of their learning habits. For instance, Chinese learners' difficulty in learning Italian grammar can be attributed to the complexity of grammatical rules and learners' grammar learning strategies which are shaped by the prevalent FL teaching methodologies in AH contexts, namely, the way they normally approach the grammar of a non-primary language. These findings must not be interpreted as a demonstration of these learners' inherent defects but a point of focus for future pedagogic practices.

The main reason for which the Chinese students' Italian learning difficulty have gradually received attention from researchers in recent years was their increasing influx into Italian universities. In China, the popularity and attraction of overseas study grows steadily. In 2006, the pre-enrollment language program "Marco Polo" was carried out with the purpose of facilitate Chinese prospective students' visa applying process and Italian leaning difficulty. Students who wish to attend university courses given in Italian are permitted to attend courses of Italian in Italy before the

university enrollment and even without any knowledge of Italian. Since then, a continuing growth of the number of Chinese students coming in Italy for study purpose has been witnessed year by year. Accordingly, Italy has become one of the most popular study-abroad destinations within Europe for Chinese students. The craze for studying in Italy emerged with a series of criticisms from language instructors and scholars for various reasons. Among various problems concerning Marco Polo and Turandot programs, i.e. regulations, administrative operation and Italian teaching, the last one bears the burnt of the majority of blames. Issues that have been discussed the most were mainly in relation to language requirements (for both attending Italian courses and academic study at universities), intensity and duration of language learning in Italy.

However, the design of two SA programs is not the only cause --- students' pre-departure Italian learning experience in China, their adaptability to new learning context in Italy and their learning beliefs affect their acquisition of Italian to a large extent. Therefore, the main goal of the current dissertation was to investigate Chinese-speaking learners' Italian learning experience in Italy according to three aspects: i) learners' language exposure in the SA learning context; ii) learners' language preparation before the SA sojourn; iii) learners' perceptions about their Italian learning experience in Italy. In other words, the aim of the conducted research was to evaluate the general situations of Chinese-speaking students' L2 exposure during the sojourn in Italy and their perceptions about SA learning experience.

Accordingly, two research questions were set up: 1) *In what ways did students gain access to language exposure outside the language classroom?* and 2) *How did students perceive their SA experience?* It was then hypothesized that the lack of diversified approaches to language exposure was a common phenomenon among the investigated Chinese-speaking learners, which indirectly led to a sense of disappointment about the efficacy of Italian learning within SA context.

The data analyses showed that, in general, Chinese learners of Italian demonstrated limited language exposure during their sojourn in Italy. These learners exposed themselves to L2 input mostly by watching original movies, reading news or

novels, attending university courses or communicating with language exchange partners, Italian teachers, friends or classmates. The majority of participants recognized the role of language exposure in L2 attainment and seemed to be willing to receive more language input. Yet the ways in which they gained access to language resources were still limited in terms of diversity and quantity. The dominance of L1 was reflected in students' living conditions and social habits --- a great part of them lived together with compatriots and their social circles mainly consisted of Chinese-speaking acquaintances. Only a few of them did build up seemingly meaningful relationships or had frequent interactions with native speakers.

One of the possible explanations to the phenomenon above were learners' language proficiency. The correlation between learners' threshold level of Italian and their degrees of exposure to Italian was one of the most significant findings from the research. Learners' L2 proficiency was found to make difference to not only their abilities to take advantage of language resources in the SA context, but also their learning beliefs. To be more specific, participants with poor pre-departure language proficiency all found Italian complicated to learn and all demonstrated the lack of language confidence. At the end of the SA programs, this group was least satisfied with the Italian learning experience abroad.

In response to the second research question, the findings suggested that Italian was considered as a complex language by most of the Chinese students. In particular, they found speaking the most difficult skill to acquire, followed by three other skills: listening, writing and reading. More than half of the participants believed that it was unnecessary to reach native-like fluency in order to understand university courses taught in Italian. Most of the participants believed that their oral skill and grammar knowledge were improved at the end of their study. They generally approved the importance of in-class formal instruction and out-of-class learning. Furthermore, participants generally preferred learning Italian with Italian teachers to Chinese teachers. Almost all participants were satisfied with their SA learning experience and considered it as a crucial turning point in their Italian learning trajectory.

Another important finding related to learners' perspectives was the correlation between L2 exposure and degrees of satisfaction on their SA learning experience. The group of participants with high level of language exposure were most satisfied with the SA learning experience in comparison with other groups.

These results support the initial hypothesis that Chinese-speaking learners' out-of-class language use was characterized by the lack of diversified methods to increase their L2 exposure, which led to the disappointment on their overall Italian learning experience in Italy. The research extends the existing knowledge on Chinese SA learners' of Italian by providing a new understanding of their perceptions about language learning and their actual language use outside the class. The fact that all 18 subjects in this research have demonstrated individual differences in terms of Italian learning backgrounds in the AH context and L2 exposure in the SA context, places extra emphasis on the importance of avoiding an overgeneralization of Chinese learners for future SA studies.

The key strength of the design of research resides in its focus on the principle role of learners in overseas language study. The SA learning context has a vital catalytic role in enhancing the efficacy of TL learning thanks to its superiority of language resources, especially comparing with the AH learning context. However, the way how learners react to the external environment and take advantage of the language resources at their disposal carries considerable weight in affecting the acquisition of TL. Although the research is based on a small scale of samples, the correlations between participants' beliefs about SA learning experiences and two groups of variables (L2 proficiency and L2 exposure) have been discovered and elaborated in a detailed way. Taken together, the research results are in line with previous findings from the SA literature in which numerous studies have already discussed and investigated factors which might influence the degree of learners' language acquisition or affective aspects of L2 learning.

Still, the generalizability of the results concluded from the present research is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, partly due to the difficulty of administrating face to face the questionnaire to a larger amount of

receivers during the research period, i.e. during the COVID-19 emergency. Thus, the findings concluded from the data of merely 18 participants cannot represent the entire group of Chinese-speaking learners present on the territory of Italy. Second, the particular circumstances of the year under which the research was carried out were also disadvantageous for international students to learn a new languages and to use their TLs in day-to-day communications with native speakers. One of the preventive measures that help to ease the problem of COVID-19 was restricting people's outdoor activities. Unfortunately, some of the subjects who spent their SA study period during this time were greatly influenced by the external living environment. Except the negative emotions resulted from the generally daunting social situations, as L2 learners their language exposure could be very limited. Third, the design of the questionnaire included inevitably imperfections: the modifications of certain items from the original questionnaires of Tragant (2012) turned out to be problematic. The scope of these changes was to approximate as much as possible the reality of Chinese students' Italian learning experience, based on previous criticisms about Marco Polo and Turandot programs. In practice, the efficacy and validity of the modified questionnaire was not improved accordingly. For example, items concerning the learning hours at the SA class and learners' certificated Italian proficiency. As results, the current investigation was not able to obtain information regarding participants attendance at the formal language instruction provided by their SA programs and the data on their language growth probably remained incomplete in comparison to the reality of learners' L2 development. Finally, the investigation on participants' L2 exposure seemed to be superficial since it involved only questions regarding participants' living conditions, social habits and part of the extended L2 reading and listening the could happen in their spare time.

More studies are needed to better understand Chinese learners' Italian learning difficulties in Italy and reveal the nature of language learning in SA contexts. It would be interesting to investigate the correlation with Chinese students' use of Italian outside the classroom and the long-term development of certain linguistic aspects through a longitudinal study. If the debate is to be moved forward, cross-national

studies that involve investigations of Italian learning both in China and Italy will be strongly recommended. Another important implication at practical level is that the language requirements for Chinese students, or in general non-native international students, to attend both SA programs and Italian tertiary-level education system should be taken into scrupulous and provident consideration. The alternative solution could also be extending the duration of Italian language courses before the enrollment of Italian universities. Moreover, it is highly encouraged for Chinese and Italian educators or program designers to consider promoting the education of Italian as a FL by broadening the channels for learning Italian in China and at the meantime, standardizing the existing private study-abroad agencies that prioritize the economic benefits and not the quality of Italian teaching. Mutual understandings between Chinese-speaking learners and Italian-speaking language teachers play an important role in enhancing the efficacy of SA learning as well. Last but not least, the conflicts between Chinese students' difficulty in acquiring Italian in the SA context and demands from the part of Italian teachers or professors at universities should be viewed as an issue generated from underlying causes such as inappropriate program design or L2 teaching methodologies and should be solved with an objective attitude and the help of reliable studies.



## Appendix

### Questionnaire

Participant n. ....

#### Participant's data

1. **Gender**

- ① Female      ② Male      ③ I prefer not to say.

2. **Type of enrolled program**

- ① Marco Polo      ② Turandot  
③ University exchange program. Please indicate the full name of your home university and your degree course .....
- ④ Other cases not listed above.....

3. **Year of enrollment** .....

4. **Duration of your program** .....months

5. **Name of the Italian university** .....

#### Before coming to Italy

6. **Modality of learning**

- ① formal language instruction at home university  
② language courses at private institution  
③ with a private tutor  
④ totally self-taught  
⑤ online courses  
⑥ other cases .....

7. **\*Certificated proficiency of Italian before coming to Italy** (If you didn't do any proficiency test before coming to Italy, skip this question.)

- ① A1      ②A2      ③B1      ④B2      ⑤C1      ⑥C2

8. **\*Types of certification**

- ① CELI      ②CILS      ③PLIDA      ④other cases .....

9. **\*Previous SA learning experience in Italy or contact with native speakers which helped you to acquire at least the basis of Italian language** (other SA programs in Italy, summer school, work, etc )

.....

### Studying Italian in Italy

10. **How many hours a week do you have class?** (including all courses or tutoring given in Italian) ..... hours

11. **Approximately how many hours a week did you attend the class?** ..... hours

12. **\*Certificated proficiency of Italian at the end of the course** (If you didn't do any test or did the test more than a year later, skip this question.)

- ①A1      ②A2      ③B1      ④B2      ⑤C1      ⑥C2

13. **\*Types of certification**

- ① CELI      ②CILS      ③PLIDA      ④other cases .....

14. **Where were you mostly staying?** (rented flat, dormitory, with host family, ecc)

- ① private flat      ② dormitory      ③ host family  
④ other cases .....

**15. In which language did you communicate with your cohabitants?**

- ① Chinese      ② Italian      ③ Neither of these two  
 ④ I lived alone.

**16. Indicate five people with which you had more contact with during the year** (at home, at the university or during weekends/holidays).

Relationship (classmate, partner, friends, flatmate, parents, etc)	How much contact have you had? (a little/some/much)	Language of communication (Chinese/Italian/Neither of these two)

Form these five people, is there anyone with which you have done everything or almost everything with together? If so, please indicate.....

**17. In general, what was your opinion about the Italian language when you stayed in Italy**

- •            •            •            •  
 quite simple    simple    normal    complex    quite complex

18. Next you will find some opinions about the learning of Italian. Choose the option that best approximates your position after you finished the SA program.

Choose one and make a cross.

(SD = I strongly disagree; D = I disagree; HA = I hardly agree; MA = I moderately agree; A = I agree; FA = I strongly agree)

	SD	D	HA	MA	A	SA
There's no need to reach native-like fluency in order to understand other non-language courses.						
I preferred learning Italian with Chinese-speaking professors.						
Attending language lessons is enough for me to learn Italian.						
My communicative competence improved quickly in this period.						
Thanks to SA experience, I understood better Italian grammar than before.						
I believed most of the improvement was obtained outside of the language classroom.						
I didn't feel comfortable speaking in Italian.						
Hanging out with native speakers actually won't help much on language learning.						

19. Rank these four language aspects according to your perception of their levels of difficulties:

(most difficult) ① > ② > ③ > ④ (least difficult)

Listening ..... Speaking ..... Reading ..... Writing .....

20. **Did you watch any film/TV series in Italian** (those with Chinese subtitles are excluded)?
- No.
  - Yes. Please also indicate at least one way in which you got access to it (streaming media platforms, CD, cinema, etc) .....
21. **Did you read any novel in Italian that were not required by the curriculum?**
- No.
  - Yes.
22. **Did you have the habit of reading news in Italian?**
- Never.
  - Yes, but I won't call it a habit.
  - Yes.
23. **During this period, did you have at least one Italian language partner that you kept in touch with?**
- No.
  - Yes.
24. **Did you take part in any activity outside your language school in which you were able to get in touch with other native speakers** (extracurricular courses, part-time jobs, sports, etc)?
- No.
  - Yes. Please describe it .....
25. **Did you intentionally seek for chances to communicate with any native speaker outside of the language classroom?**
- No.

- Yes.

**26. How would you qualify this language learning experience on the scale of 1-10?**

(1 = extremely negative, 10 = extremely positive) .....

**27. Reflecting your entire trajectory of Italian learning, would you consider it as a turning point?**

- No.
- Yes.

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