Article

A Four-Week American High School Study Abroad Program's Impact on Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence and English Oral Proficiency

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Abstract: This study examined the impact of a four-week American study abroad program on Chinese high school students' English oral proficiency (EOP), which refers to English listening and speaking skills in this research, and intercultural competence (IC). Three key areas were investigated: (1) the effect on students' English speaking and listening abilities, (2) the influence on intercultural competence, and (3) the interaction between oral English and cultural competence development. The study involved 18 Grade 11 students, divided into two groups, 9 students in the Study Abroad (SA) group who participated in the U.S. program, and 9 students in the At-Home (AH) group who did not. Additionally, four teachers were involved, with two accompanying the SA group during their four-week stay in the U.S., while the other two remained with the AH group. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires, IELTS mock and official tests administered before, during, and after the program. Both groups took IELTS tests at four intervals: just before the sojourn, one week after returning, three months after returning, and six months after returning. This data was complemented by qualitative insights gathered from post-program interviews with students and teachers. The results highlighted substantial improvements in IELTS mock and official scores, cultural experiences, and intercultural competence for the SA group compared to the AH group. Furthermore, interview responses underscored enhanced communication confidence, elevated cultural awareness, and the synergistic development of oral English proficiency alongside cultural understanding among the SA group participants. This study demonstrates the transformative potential of study abroad programs to cultivate essential global competencies for international engagement. A comprehensive 'BRIDGE and SUPPORT' system is proposed to synergistically enhance oral English skills and intercultural competence through an interdependent, reciprocal process facilitated by targeted interventions before, during, and after immersive study abroad experiences.

Keywords: study abroad; Chinese high school students; English oral proficiency; intercultural competence; mixed methods

1. Introduction

In promoting intercultural exchanges and mutual learning, the development of effective communication skills and intercultural competence is essential for Chinese youth (Ding, 2023). This is implicitly supported by Xi Jinping's congratulatory letter to the first Forum on Building up China's Cultural Strength, which underscores cultural confidence and the significance of intercultural exchanges, thereby suggesting the importance of these competencies for China's engagement in the global arena (Gov.cn, 2023).

The specific problem area lies in equipping Chinese students with the intercultural competencies and linguistic abilities required to participate effectively in international exchanges and contribute to building a community with a shared future for humanity (Ou & Gu,

2018). Developing intercultural competence, encompassing the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for successful cross-cultural interactions, remains a challenge for many Chinese students due to limited exposure and opportunities for immersive cultural exchange experiences (Goldstein, 2022; Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Jin & Cortazzi, 2017a). Additionally, enhancing English oral proficiency is crucial for Chinese students to communicate effectively in international settings and facilitate cross-cultural understanding (Gao & Kennedy, 2019; Guo, 2015).

Despite progress in English language education, improving English oral proficiency, particularly fluency, accuracy, and the ability to communicate effectively in various contexts, is an essential aspect that needs further attention (Gao & Kennedy, 2019). The interplay between intercultural competence and oral proficiency is vital, as effective cross-cultural communication requires not only linguistic proficiency but also an understanding of cultural nuances and the ability to navigate diverse contexts appropriately.

Short-term study abroad programs have gained popularity in China as a means to expose students to different cultures and enhance their language skills (Chen & Chen, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these programs in achieving the desired outcomes has not been extensively studied (Thompson & Lee, 2022), particularly in the Chinese high school context (Gao & Kennedy, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2021). By addressing this problem area through research and evaluation, valuable insights can be gained to optimize the impact of such programs and align them more closely with the broader goals of promoting inter-civilizational exchanges and mutual learning (Ding, 2023).

This study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the impact of the four-week American high school program. It explores three key research questions: (1) the program's effect on Chinese high school students' English oral proficiency, (2) its influence on their intercultural competence, and (3) the interplay between changes in language proficiency and intercultural competence during and after the program. The quantitative component involves administering pre-, during, and post-program questionnaires, including the adapted Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese High School Students (AIC-CHSS) scale, to measure self-reported cultural experiences and intercultural competence. Additionally, standardized IELTS mock and official exams are conducted before and after the program to assess changes in English oral proficiency, specifically in speaking and listening skills. Concurrently, qualitative data is collected through semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding the program's influence on language proficiency and intercultural competence development.

By interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data, this research design aims to provide a holistic understanding of the research problem, capturing the multidimensional nature of the investigated phenomena. Specifically, the goal is to explore an integrated approach, exemplified by the proposed 'BRIDGE and SUPPORT' system, which functions to help better promote the linguistic and cultural gains before, during and after the immersive study abroad experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an integrated conceptual framework that interlinks intercultural competence (IC), study abroad (SA) experiences, and English oral proficiency (EOP), as illustrated in Figure 1. This interconnected structure emphasizes the synergy between IC, SA, and EOP, indicating that the study abroad experiences of Chinese students play a crucial role in simultaneously advancing intercultural competence and English oral proficiency (Chen & Chen, 2021; Ou & Gu, 2018). In this study, EOP is defined to include both speaking and listening skills, aligning with widely accepted frameworks such as the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020), the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012), and Bachman and Palmer's (1996) communicative competence model.
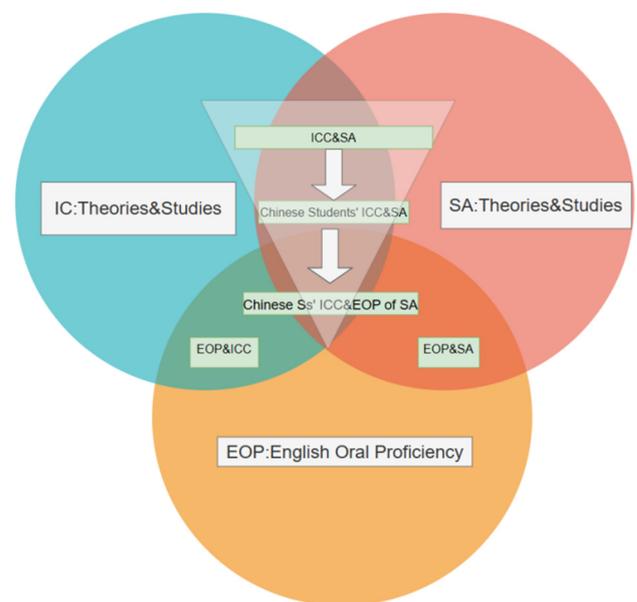
Figure 1. The structure of conceptual framework.

2.2. Intercultural Competence Theories and Research

Intercultural competence (IC) is the ability to effectively communicate and behave appropriately across different cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006, 2009). Bennett's (1986, 2009) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) outlines how individuals progress from ethnocentric stages, characterized by denial and

minimization of cultural differences, toward ethnorelative stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Byram's (1997, 2021) model further expands this conceptualization by highlighting components such as attitudes, knowledge, and intercultural skills, emphasizing the importance of critical cultural awareness.

Zhang and Yao's (2020) Integrated Model for Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence Development (IMCSICD) integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, emphasizing cultural knowledge, empathy, and communication skills. Assessments such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) based on Bennett's DMIS, and the Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese College Students (AIC-CCS) based on Byram's model, have been effectively utilized to measure IC in educational settings (Hammer et al., 2003; Wu et al., 2013). Wang and Teo (2024) empirically validated Byram's framework among Chinese students, reinforcing the interconnected nature of IC dimensions.

Study abroad programs significantly contribute to IC development by providing direct cultural immersion (Kinginger, 2009; Paige et al., 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2012; Zhao & Liu, 2022). However, structured interventions and guided reflection are necessary to maximize intercultural learning outcomes (Chen & Zhu, 2020; Ngai, 2022). Recent meta-analyses suggest experiential immersion typically outperforms classroom interventions in fostering intercultural competence, though optimal results arise from combining both (Huang et al., 2023; Qin et al., 2022; Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

2.3. Study Abroad Theories and Research

Theories underlying study abroad research highlight its transformative potential for students' personal and intercultural growth. Bennett's (1993) developmental framework and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) stress the importance of intercultural exposure and critical reflection in reshaping students' cultural perspectives. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory similarly underscores reflective practice after cultural immersion as essential for effective intercultural learning.

Short-term study abroad programs (typically under eight weeks) effectively enhance language proficiency and intercultural competence, though outcomes vary based on immersion intensity and learner-specific factors (Cubillos et al., 2008; Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022; Neff & Apple, 2023; Sullivan, 2022). Despite positive findings, concerns remain regarding insufficient immersion and potential reinforcement of stereotypes (Engle & Engle, 2003; Lemmons, 2023; Scoffham & Barnes, 2009). An integrated approach addressing language proficiency and intercultural competence simultaneously is necessary for optimizing short-term program outcomes (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Nguyen, 2017; Yu et al., 2023).

Importantly, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) conducted a seminal study comparing oral fluency acquisition in Spanish among students in at-home and study abroad contexts. Their findings revealed that students studying abroad demonstrated significantly higher gains in oral fluency, attributed to richer linguistic environments and increased opportunities for meaningful interaction. While their study primarily assessed spoken production—specifically fluency metrics such as speech rate and pausing patterns—it provides a critical empirical foundation for understanding how study abroad contexts enhance spoken language development.

2.4. Chinese Students' Experiences with Study Abroad Programs

Research on Chinese students' intercultural competence and language development through study abroad has increased, yet findings are mixed. While some studies found limited intercultural gains from study abroad alone, highlighting the need for reciprocal communication and structured interactions (Bean & Boffy-Ramirez, 2019), others identified tangible improvements in intercultural awareness and language proficiency through targeted experiential learning strategies (Gao & Kennedy, 2019; Mu & Yu, 2021; Zhou et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, there is a notable research gap concerning Chinese high school students, as existing studies predominantly focus on college populations. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by examining the intercultural competence and oral proficiency of Chinese high school students in short-term study abroad contexts, thereby enriching current knowledge and informing future educational interventions.

2.5. Mixed Methods Methodology in Study Abroad Research

Mixed methods research (MMR), combining quantitative and qualitative data, provides comprehensive insights into complex phenomena like study abroad outcomes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). Quantitative methods facilitate objective assessment of language proficiency and intercultural competence, while qualitative methods offer detailed contextual understanding of student experiences (Dou et al., 2023; McKim, 2017).

Careful integration of quantitative assessments and qualitative narratives enables researchers to address the multifaceted nature of student learning and development during study abroad (Greene, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Given these advantages, this study employs a convergent parallel mixed methods design to explore the reciprocal relationship between intercultural competence and English oral proficiency, providing a robust analytical framework to interpret complex student outcomes comprehensively.

To address the gaps identified in the literature, the present study examines the impact of a four-week American high school immersion program on Chinese students' English oral proficiency and intercultural competence. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does a four-week study abroad program affect the English oral proficiency of Chinese high school students?

RQ2: How does a four-week American high school program influence Chinese students' intercultural competence?

RQ3: How do changes in English oral proficiency and intercultural competence interact and influence each other during and after the four-week program?

Hypotheses (as illustrated in Figure 2):
Participation in the four-week program will enhance Chinese students' intercultural competence, as evidenced by increases in intercultural knowledge, awareness, skills, and attitudes.
The four-week study abroad program will improve Chinese high school students' English oral proficiency—

specifically their speaking and listening skills—relative to peers who do not participate.

There will be a reciprocal relationship between English oral proficiency and intercultural competence, such that growth in one dimension facilitates development in the other during and after the four-week program.

For the investigation, a convergent parallel mixed methods design was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation to provide a holistic view of the program's effects. The rationale for using mixed methods is that quantitative metrics (e.g., test scores, questionnaire results) can objectively capture changes in language proficiency and intercultural competence, while qualitative data (e.g., interviews, observations) offer deeper insight into students' experiences and perceptions. Integrating both types of data allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how the four-week program influences participants, capitalizing on the strengths of each approach and compensating for their individual limitations.
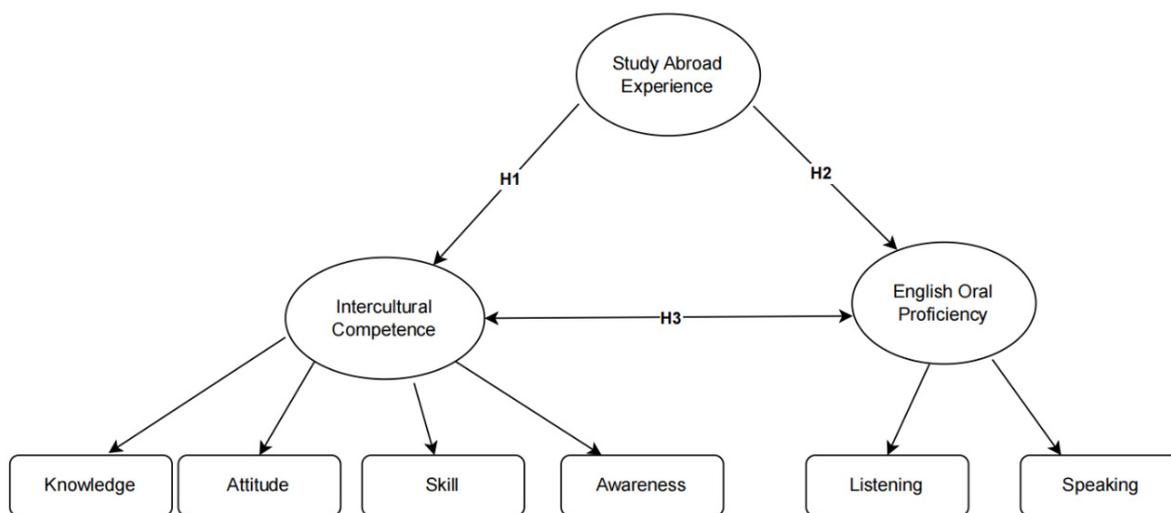
Figure 2. Research hypotheses.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. The Design

Two schools, one from Jiangxi Province in China and the other from Nevada, USA, have been collaborating on an international program for 10 years. Prior to COVID-19, they had conducted four years of annual short-term study abroad programs. This year marks the restart of the program, with 11 students and 3 teachers from China participating in a 4-week program in the United States. The program is tailored to align with the curricular requirements and institutional constraints of Chinese high schools. Empirical research supports the effectiveness of short-term programs (3–5 weeks), demonstrating measurable gains in students' cultural awareness, oral

proficiency, and intercultural engagement when structured reflection and guided cultural learning are incorporated (Dewey et al., 2013; Vande Berg et al., 2012).

The program begins with a pre-departure orientation to prepare students for cultural differences and provide guidance on cultural norms. Once in the United States, students are placed with American host families for immersive homestays, allowing them to experience daily life and customs firsthand. The program also includes field trips and activities like visiting university campus and historical sites of cultural significance. To support students' in class learning, they are offered along with in-class learning partners. Throughout the program, students are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and share their insights, incorporating reflection and assessment components.

## 3.2. The Research Design

3.2.1. Participants and Data Collection

The study focused on 18 Grade 11 Chinese high school students (*n* = 18), divided equally into two groups. Group A comprised 9 students who participated in a four-week study abroad (SA) program in the United States. These students were selected based on voluntary sign-up, parental consent, and teacher recommendations, with consideration of academic standing and motivation for international exposure. Group B included 9 students from the same class who did not participate in the SA program and remained in China. They were randomly selected to serve as a control group and matched with Group A in terms of gender, academic level, and age to ensure comparability. This group represents students who continued with their regular curriculum in the home environment during the same period.

To enhance the robustness of the analysis, the study also incorporated perspectives from four teachers (*n* = 4).

Two teachers accompanied the SA group during their overseas program, providing supervision and instructional support, while the other two had been teaching both groups but remained in the home institution. These teachers offered valuable longitudinal insights into the students' language development and intercultural growth, both before and after the program.

Together, the participant pool consisted of 9 students in the SA group, 9 students in the AH group, and 4 teachers, thus enabling a triangulated, mixed-methods examination of short-term study abroad outcomes.

The data collection is divided into 3 phases: before-sojourn, during sojourn and post sojourn (see Figure 3). Quantitative data was collected through pre- during and post-program questionnaires (see Appendices A–C), pre and post IELTS official and mock exams, while qualitative data was gathered through post-program students' and teachers' interviews (see Appendix D).
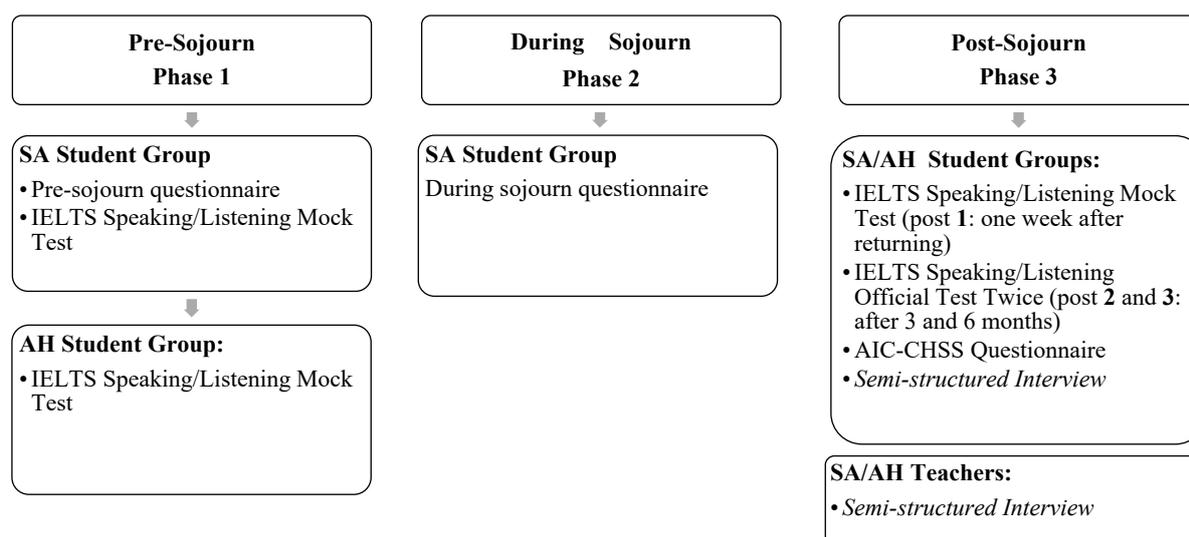
Figure 3. The procedure of data collection.

3.2.2. Instruments

Quantitative Instruments

Pre-, during and post-program questionnaires were administered to assess students' self-reported cultural expectations and intercultural competence. The Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese High School Students Questionnaire (AIC-CHSS), adopted from the AIC-CCS (Wu et al., 2013), were utilized (See Appendix C).

Similar to the AIC-CCS, the AIC-CHSS questionnaire evaluates six dimensions: self-knowledge (KN-A), knowledge about other cultures (KN-B), skills for intercultural communication (SK-A), cognitive abilities for intercultural interactions (SK-B), attitudes towards cultural differences (AT), and awareness (AW). Respondents rate each item on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) to indicate their level for each dimension (Li, 2021). To accommodate the understanding capacity of high school students, some items from certain dimensions have been removed in this research (see Table 1).

IELTS mock exams: Standardized IELTS listening and speaking mock tests were administered pre and post sojourn to two groups of students to measure and compare the change of language proficiency. Scoring procedures and interpretations will be explained.

Table 1. The AIC-CHSS Scale.

Scale	Dimension	Factor	Number of Items
AIC-CHSS	Knowledge	KN-A (knowledge of self)	3
		KN-B (knowledge of others)	5
	Attitude	AT	3
	Skill	SK-A (intercultural communicative skills)	8
		SK-B (intercultural cognitive skills)	3
	Awareness	AW	3
Total			25

Qualitative Instruments

Semi-structured teacher and student interviews: An interview protocol with open-ended questions were designed to explore teachers' and students' perceptions, experiences, and feedback regarding the program's impact on students' language proficiency and intercultural competence.

3.2.3. Informed Consent and Ethical Considerations

Informed consent were obtained from all participants (students and teachers) and their legal guardians (for students). A detailed information sheet and consent form will be provided, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation (See Appendices A–D). Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

The study followed ethical guidelines and protocols to ensure the protection of human subjects. Participants' identities and personal information will be kept confidential, and data will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. The study was conducted in a manner that minimizes potential risks and ensured the well-being of all participants. For further confidentiality, participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms, either English names or alphabetical identifiers.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for questionnaire responses and IELTS mock and official test scores in listening and speaking, facilitating comparisons between groups. Inferential statistical analyses were conducted using paired-sample and independent-sample t-tests to examine within-group and between-group changes. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated for all statistical comparisons to determine practical significance.

Qualitative data, including interview transcripts from students and teachers, underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding focused on identifying patterns related to English oral proficiency, intercultural competence, and the interplay between these elements. Data triangulation was employed to improve validity, and

integration of findings followed a side-by-side comparison approach to draw meta-inferences about program impact.

4. Research Findings

This mixed-methods study gathered quantitative and qualitative data to examine the program's impact. Surveys (including an intercultural competence scale), standardized English tests (IELTS listening and speaking), and semi-structured interviews were analyzed collectively. For clarity, the findings are organized around the three research questions: RQ1 (English oral proficiency development), RQ2 (intercultural competence development), and RQ3 (the relationship between oral proficiency and intercultural competence). Each subsection below addresses the relevant RQ(s) with integrated evidence from pre-sojourn, during-sojourn, and post-sojourn data.

4.1. Participant Background and Pre-Sojourn Expectations (RQ1 & RQ2)

Eleven Chinese high school students (age 15–18, mostly Grade 11) participated in the four-week U.S. program. The majority (73%) were male, and none had traveled overseas in the past three years. Their prior knowledge of the United States was limited: about 64% reported they "know some" about U.S. culture and 27% said they "know much," indicating modest pre-sojourn familiarity with the host culture. These background details suggest that most students were entering the program with minimal recent intercultural exposure, a point of relevance for both RQ1 (language use in a new environment) and RQ2 (initial intercultural readiness).

Expectations for improvement in English communication were very high. In a pre-sojourn survey (Table 2), nearly all students (≈91%) anticipated improving their English speaking and listening skills at least "somewhat," with almost half expecting their skills to improve "a lot" or "greatly." Participants also expressed strong motivation to engage with American culture: for example, mean interest ratings for experiencing host family life and learning local social norms were $M = 4.73$ and $M = 4.45$ (on a 5-point scale), respectively, indicating a keen desire for intercultural learning. At the same time, students were aware of potential challenges. The most commonly anticipated difficulties were language barriers in communication, interacting with American classmates, and adapting

to host family life (each cited by ~27% of participants, i.e., 3 students). To cope with these challenges, many planned to rely on support from their teachers (73% of students) and host families (64%). This combination of high motivation and pragmatic awareness provides a baseline context for the study: participants entered the sojourn eager to improve their English oral proficiency and to learn

about U.S. culture, while also recognizing areas of potential struggle. In summary, these pre-sojourn findings establish the participants' starting point for RQ1 and RQ2—they were enthusiastic and motivated language learners with moderate intercultural awareness, yet largely inexperienced in immersive foreign environments.

Table 2. Pre-sojourn questionnaire analysis.

Question Number		Percentage/Mean Score					
Q1, Q3	Demographic Information	Age:15-18	Grade 1l (10) 90.91%			Grade 12 (1) 9.09%	
Q2		Gender	Male (8) 72.73%			Female (3) 27.27%	
Q4, Q5		Overseas Experience	None of the students has the experience of travelling overseas in the last three years.				
Q6	Destination Country Knowledge	Know Nothing (0)	Know A Few (1) 9.09%	Know Some (7) 63.64%	Know Much (3) 27.27%	Know Well (0)	
Q7	Expectation of Improvement (English Communication Skills)	Not at all (0)	A little (1) 9.09%	Some (5) 45.45%	A lot (3) 27.27%	Greatly (2) 18.18%	
Q9	Perceived Challenges	Language communication (3) 27.27%	Cultural adaptation (2) 18.18%	Communication with the host family (1) 9.09%	Classroom Learning (0)	Get along with the American classmates (3) 27.27%	Homesickness (2) 18.18% · Other (0)
Q10	Perceived Strategies (multiple choice)	The accompanying teachers (8) 72.73%	Fellow students (4) 36.36%	Parents back home (3) 27.27%	Host family (7) 63.64%	Emergency contact number (3) 27.27%	
Q11	The Overall Expectations (5 Likert scale mean score)	Language and culture 4.36	Food culture 4.27	Social norms 4.45	Education system 4.18	Host family life experience 4.73	

4.2. Experiences during the Sojourn (RQ1 & RQ2)

Once in the United States, students encountered various linguistic and cultural adjustments. In the first two weeks, nearly half the participants reported difficulties with language use and understanding the American classroom environment (45% noted each), and about one-quarter struggled with unfamiliar food (27%) (See Table 3). These early challenges highlight how differences in language and daily life immediately tested students' adaptability, addressing RQ1 (real-life English use difficulties) and RQ2 (cultural adjustments). By confronting these issues, students began actively applying strategies to navigate their new setting.

Table 3. The difficulties/challenges of the first two weeks.

Difficulties/Challenges	Number	Percentage
Language challenges/difficulties	5	45.45%
Unfamiliar with the food	3	27.27%
Different lifestyle of the host family	2	18.18%
Different classroom requirement in the US classroom	5	45.45%
Other	4	36.36%

Mid-sojourn reflective questionnaires and journals provide qualitative insight into how students were coping and learning. Open-ended responses were coded according to the dimensions of the AIC-CHSS intercultural competence framework, revealing growth in knowledge,

awareness, attitudes, and skills. Specifically, students' comments illustrated the following Table 4.

Table 4. Qualitative data analysis of during sojourn questionnaire.

Theme	Responses (Translated from the Participants' Response)
Knowledge	'In the US, studying is like opening the door to the world'; 'In the US, living is like playing new games because there are many new discoveries'; 'Experiencing foreign teaching at a partner school. Experiencing local culture outside of school.' 'Studying in the US is like studying in China because I'm still free';
Awareness	'In the US, living is like a new machine, always discovering new features'; 'The class atmosphere was active when students were studying.' 'The sojourner away from home constantly longs for their homeland';
Attitudes	'I lived like them, and I adapted' 'I don't know how to overcome it.' 'I used a translator. I tried to get used to the eating habits';
Skills	'I studied harder at English'; 'Communicate with roommates and classmates.'

Knowledge: Students expressed curiosity and openness about new information and perspectives. Some used metaphors to describe learning (e.g., "studying is like

opening the door to the world"), indicating an expanding cultural and linguistic knowledge base.

Awareness: Many remarks reflected heightened awareness of cultural differences and similarities. Students compared Chinese and American norms and noted novel aspects of U.S. life, demonstrating emerging intercultural awareness and self-reflection.

Attitudes: Emotional responses ranged from initial anxiety to growing resilience and adaptability. For example, one student noted, "I lived like them, and I adapted," exemplifying a shift toward a positive, open-minded attitude despite early discomfort.

Skills: Participants also reported developing practical communication strategies. These included using translation tools or apps when stuck, actively seeking clarification in conversations, and engaging more with peers despite language gaps.

These qualitative observations show students actively engaging with both target-language practice and cultural learning throughout the immersion. Not only were they using English daily (practicing listening and speaking in classes and with host families, as per RQ1), they were also navigating intercultural situations (learning to appreciate and adapt to cultural differences, as per RQ2).

In sum, the during-sojourn findings support RQ1 and RQ2 by demonstrating that the immersion environment prompted significant language use and intercultural adjustment. Students were learning to communicate more effectively in English while simultaneously developing strategies to handle cultural challenges.

4.3. Post-Sojourn Intercultural Competence Survey Results (RQ2)

To assess intercultural development (RQ2), all students completed a post-program intercultural competence survey (AIC-CHSS). For additional context, a comparison group of similar peers who did not go abroad (staying at home in China) also took the survey. The study abroad group (Group A) scored higher on all six dimensions of intercultural competence than the at-home group (Group B), as summarized in Table 5.

In self-knowledge (KN-A), Group A scored *M* = 4.00 (*SD* = 0.60), while Group B scored *M* = 3.85 (*SD* = 0.63). In knowledge of other cultures (KN-B), the difference was more pronounced (Group A: *M* = 3.18, *SD* = 0.39; Group B: *M* = 2.71, *SD* = 0.53). Similarly, Group A outperformed Group B in attitudes (AT: 4.41 vs. 4.07), intercultural awareness (AW: 3.74 vs. 3.22), and both communication (SK-A: 3.64 vs. 3.65) and cognitive skills (SK-B: 3.41 vs. 3.07). While the numerical gaps varied, the consistent

advantage across dimensions indicates that the short-term study abroad program contributed meaningfully to the development of students' intercultural competence in both knowledge-based and experiential domains.

Table 5. The Group Statistics of AIC-CHSS.

| Skill & Group		Mean	Std. Deviation
KNA	A	4.00	0.60
	B	3.85	0.63
KNB	A	3.18	0.39
	B	2.71	0.53
AT	A	4.41	0.59
	B	4.07	0.81
SKA	A	3.64	0.73
	B	3.65	0.79
SKB	A	3.41	0.74
	B	3.07	0.70
AW	A	3.74	0.68
	B	3.22	0.67

While these results are based on small samples (*n* = 9 per group), Group A demonstrated higher means on all dimensions, reflecting the added value of immersive intercultural experiences. The greatest differences were observed in intercultural awareness and knowledge about others, indicating that short-term international exposure may particularly enhance reflective cultural understanding and curiosity. These findings support the hypothesis that short-term study abroad programs contribute positively to adolescents' development of intercultural competence, particularly in skills related to awareness, empathy, and perspective-taking.

### 4.4. English Oral Proficiency Development Over Time (RQ1 & RQ3)

To address RQ1, the students' English oral proficiency was tracked over time using IELTS speaking and listening tests, each with a maximum band score of 9, to evaluate participants' communicative development throughout the study period. Both Group A (study abroad participants) and Group B (at-home counterparts) were tested at four intervals: just before the sojourn (Pre-test), one week after returning (Post 1), three months after returning (Post 2), and six months after returning (Post 3). This longitudinal design captures immediate gains and longer-term trajectories. Figure 4 illustrates the trends for IELTS Speaking, and Figure 5 for IELTS Listening. The report includes the key patterns, including statistical significance and effect sizes, for each skill (see Table 6). Group A started with slightly lower proficiency on average, but their growth patterns differed from Group B in important ways related to RQ1 and RQ3.

Table 6. Summary of statistical findings.

Comparison	Group	Skill	Mean Diff	*t*	*p* (Double)	Cohen's *d*
Pre vs. Post1	A	Speaking	+0.56	2.00	0.085	0.67
	A	Listening	+0.28	1,50	0.180	0.50
	B	Speaking	+0.28	1.17	0.286	0.39
	B	Listening	0.00	0.00	1.000	0.00
Pre vs. Post2	A	Speaking	+0.22	0.89	0.404	0.30
	A	Listening	+0.28	1.50	0.180	0.50
	B	Speaking	+0.23	0.96	0.368	0.32
	B	Listening	+0.22	1.00	0.347	0.33
Pre vs. Post3	A	Speaking	+0.39	1.78	0.118	0.59
	A	Listening	+0.83	3.23	0.012	1.11
	B	Speaking	+0.50	2.24	0.058	0.75
	B	Listening	+0.67	2.50	0.038	0.83
Post3: A vs. B (between)	A vs. B	Speaking	−0.33	−0.87	0.405	−0.36
	A vs. B	Listening	−0.33	−0.79	0.447	−0.33
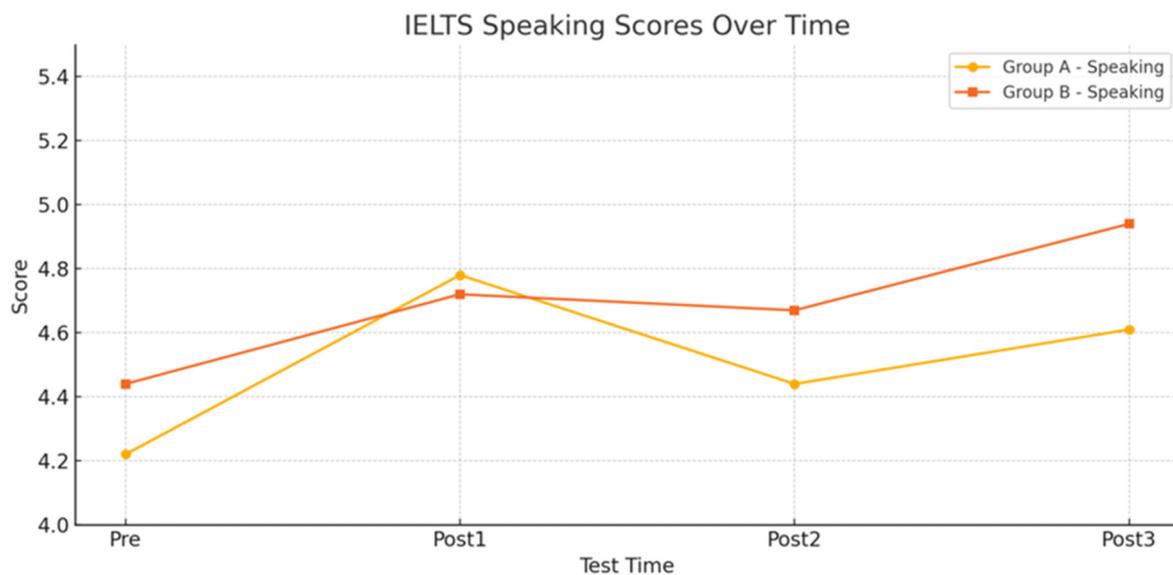
Figure 4. IELTS speaking scores over time.
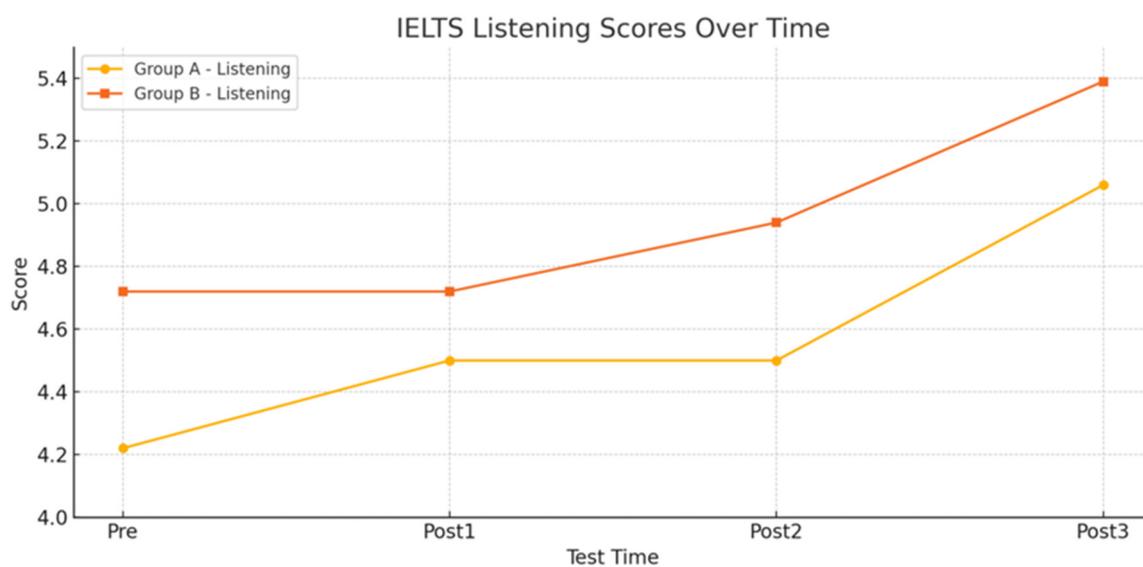
Figure 5. IELTS listening scores over time.

4.4.1. Speaking Test

At Pre, Group A had a lower mean speaking score (*M* = 4.22, *SD* = 0.34) compared to Group B (*M* = 4.44, *SD* = 0.31). By Post 1, Group A's mean increased substantially to *M* = 4.78 (*SD* = 0.39), a mean difference of +0.56 bands, *t*(8) = 2.00, *p* = 0.085, *d* = 0.67, indicating a moderate effect size though not conventionally significant. Group B also improved to *M* = 4.72 (SD = 0.33), *t*(8) = 1.17, *p* = 0.286, *d* = 0.39.

By Post 2, Group A's mean dipped to *M* = 4.44, while Group B rose to *M* = 4.67. At Post 3, both groups reached their highest scores (A: *M* = 4.61; B: *M* = 4.94). The final between-group difference at Post 3 was not statistically significant (*t*(16) = −0.87, *p* = 0.405, *d* = −0.36), indicating convergence in speaking proficiency.

4.4.2. Listening Test

At the pre-test, Group B outperformed Group A (*M* = 4.72 vs. *M* = 4.22). At Post 1, Group A's mean rose to *M* = 4.50 (*SD* = 0.38), *t*(8) = 1.50, *p* = 0.180, *d* = 0.50, whereas Group B remained stable. At Post 2, Group B increased to *M* = 4.94, and Group A held steady at *M* = 4.50. By Post 3, both groups improved further (A: *M* = 5.06; B: *M* = 5.39), with Group A's within-group gain reaching statistical significance (*t*(8) = 3.23, *p* = 0.012, *d* = 1.11). Group B also showed significant improvement (*t*(8) = 2.50, *p* = 0.038, *d* = 0.83). The final between-group difference at Post 3 remained non-significant (*t*(16) = −0.79, *p* = 0.447, *d* = −0.33).

Statistical comparisons (see Table 6) confirm these trends. Group A (study abroad) exhibited rapid, moderate short-term gains in speaking immediately after the program (*d* = 0.67 at Post 1), and a moderate delayed improvement in listening by six months (*d* = 1.11). Group B (at-home) demonstrated more gradual, steady progress in both skills over the six months, with effect sizes in the moderate range (e.g., *d* = 0.75 for speaking and *d* = 0.83 for listening from Pre to Post 3). By the six-month follow-up, Group B had reached slightly higher mean scores than Group A in both speaking and listening (by 0.33 bands), though none of these between-group differences were statistically significant (*p* = 0.405 for speaking, *p* = 0.447 for listening; see Table 6). While these final advantages for Group B did not reach statistical significance, the associated effect sizes (−0.36 for speaking and −0.33 for listening) suggest a small practical difference that might become more pronounced with a larger sample or over a longer period.

From a pedagogical perspective, these results highlight the interplay between immersive and at-home learning (addressing RQ3). Group A's immersion experience provided an early boost—particularly in speaking—that might correspond to increased confidence and real-world practice. Group B's continuous learning led to later gains, likely through sustained instruction and practice. Viewed through Bennett's (2009) DMIS framework, one could

infer that Group A's intensive cultural immersion pushed them quickly into more advanced stages of intercultural communication (which often requires higher language performance), whereas Group B's progression was gradual. By six months, both routes yielded comparable proficiency outcomes, underscoring that short-term immersion is highly effective for jump-starting oral proficiency (RQ1), but continued engagement (either abroad or at home) is crucial for maintaining and furthering those gains.

Overall, the quantitative language findings confirm that the study abroad had a significant positive impact on English oral proficiency (RQ1) and provide insight into how these gains compare to at-home learning, thereby informing RQ3 on the interaction between language progress and the immersion context.

4.5. Interview Findings and Reciprocal Development (RQ1–RQ3)

To deepen understanding of the quantitative results, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders after the program. Six interviews were completed: two with student participants (pseudonymized here as L and Y), two with the Chinese teachers who accompanied the study abroad program (Lydia and Eric), and two with English teachers who taught the students in China before/after the sojourn (Joy and Stan). These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. The analysis focused on three core dimensions corresponding to our research questions: (1) English oral proficiency development (RQ1), (2) intercultural competence development (RQ2), and (3) the reciprocal relationship between language proficiency and intercultural growth (RQ3). Table 7 synthesizes the interview findings by theme and respondent group, providing a triangulated perspective to complement the survey and test results.

4.5.1. English Oral Proficiency (RQ1)

Both students and teachers reported that immersive exposure in the United States significantly boosted students' English speaking and listening skills. The student interviewees described notable improvements in fluency and confidence. They felt more capable of expressing themselves in English and noted using more complex sentence structures by the end of the program—gains they attributed to daily practice with native speakers (host families, local peers) and being "forced" to communicate in English throughout the day. The teachers who traveled with the students corroborated these perceptions. For instance, Eric observed that upon returning to China, the students' speaking clarity and spontaneity in class were "definitely strengthened" compared to before the trip. Lydia mentioned that in group discussions and role-plays during the sojourn, students progressively took more initiative and

spoke with greater expressiveness, indicating improved oral competency. The at-home teachers (Joy and Stan) further confirmed these developments: they noticed that returning students were more willing to speak up in English and participated more actively in class. Stan remarked that several students' IELTS speaking scores increased by 1.0 to 1.5 bands after the program—a substantial improvement in a standardized test context. Collectively, these accounts provide qualitative support for the test score gains (RQ1), illustrating that immersion enhanced not only measurable proficiency but also students' confidence and willingness to use English in authentic settings.

Table 7. The interview analysis.

Theme	Description	Findings for Students (L & Y)	Findings for SA Teachers (Lydia & Eric)	Findings for AH Teachers (Joy & Stan)
Effect on English Oral Proficiency (RQ1)	Both students and teachers talk about progress in students ability to speak and understand English.	- Significant improvements in listening and speaking (L &Y) - Better listening comprehension, more confident expression (Y) - Improved speaking through interactions, using more complex sentences (L)	- Noticeable improvements in students' speaking and listening (Lydia & Eric) - More confidence and proactivity in communication (Eric) - Better understanding/ responding to teachers (Lydia) - - More expressive and engaging in activities like role-play (Lydia)	- Observed improvements in oral abilities of SA group (Stan) - More confidence, willingness to speak up (Joy & Stan) - Active class participation (mock exams) (Joy) - - Significant IELTS score increases (1-1.5 bands) (Stan)
Influence on Intercultural Competence (RQ2)	Although differs by the students' language level most students gain a deeper understanding of and ability to navigate different cultural contexts.	- Gained firsthand cultural experiences (L & Y) - Living with host family enabled cultural participation (events, traditions) (Y) - Some cultural knowledge gained but limited understanding (L) - Became more aware of cultural sensitivities (Y) - Introduced Chinese culture to hosts (Y)	- Students gained deeper cross-cultural understanding through authentic experiences (Lydia & Eric) - Initial misunderstandings due to language limitations (Eric) - Gradually became more open-minded and accepting of diversity (Eric)	- SA group demonstrated higher cultural understanding, openness, ability to communicate cross-culturally (Joy) - - Broader perspectives drawing from US experiences (Stan)
Interaction between Language & Intercultural Competence (RQ3)	Proficiency in English and intercultural competence mutually reinforce each other during the program.	- Reciprocal relationship between language and intercultural development (L & Y) - Language aided navigating cultural differences (Y) - Cultural exposure motivated further language learning (Y) - Improved proficiency enabled better cultural comprehension(L) - Applied acquired skills/knowledge to language learning & diverse interactions after return (L & Y)	- Perceived reciprocal relationship between English skills and handling cultural differences (Lydia & Eric) - Better proficiency enabled smoother cross-cultural interactions (Lydia) - Experiencing cultural gaps motivated English improvement (Eric) - - After return, heightened motivation for language practice & international experiences (Lydia)	- SA group exhibited more confidence applying oral English skills (Joy) - Used American slang/idioms naturally, showcasing authentic acquisition (Stan) - Nurtured independence, decision-making, responsibility (timely work) (Stan) - - Less evident difference in academic skills like test-taking strategies (Joy)

4.5.2. Intercultural Competence (RQ2)

Interviewees also detailed growth in students' intercultural understanding and adaptability. The student participants recounted firsthand experiences with American culture that broadened their perspectives. For example, student Y described celebrating a U.S. holiday with her host family and also introducing her own culture by cooking traditional Chinese dumplings for them during Lunar New Year—an exchange that she felt deepened mutual understanding. Such experiences helped students develop greater empathy and insight into cultural differences. Initially, some students (especially those with lower English proficiency) felt misunderstandings and culture shock, which aligns with early-stage difficulties noted in the surveys. However, as the weeks passed, they reported becoming more open-minded and comfortable in the new environment. The accompanying teachers echoed these observations: they noted that continuous interaction with host families and local communities pushed students to step outside their comfort zones. Over the month, students became more adept at reading social cues, respecting different customs, and reflecting on their own cultural biases. Joy, one of the at-home teachers, noted that upon return, students demonstrated a clearer appreciation for cultural diversity in class discussions, often bringing up comparisons between U.S. and Chinese practices. These qualitative insights confirm that the study abroad experience significantly enhanced various facets of intercultural competence (RQ2)—including cultural awareness, attitude, and interaction skills—as quantitatively captured by the AIC-CHSS survey.

4.5.3. Interplay between Language Proficiency and Intercultural Learning (RQ3)

A central theme across interviews was the reciprocal relationship between improving language skills and

developing intercultural competence (RQ3). Participants consistently noted that better English proficiency empowered deeper cultural engagement, while rich cultural encounters, in turn, motivated further language learning. For instance, Lydia (the teacher) commented that students with stronger English at the outset were able to engage in more meaningful conversations with locals, which accelerated their cultural learning; conversely, facing cultural challenges (such as misunderstandings or curiosity about different norms) often drove students to push their language skills to communicate and learn more. Student L mentioned that when he struggled to discuss a cultural topic with his host family, it inspired him to study new vocabulary that evening so he could try again the next day—a clear example of cultural curiosity fueling language development. Both American-trip teachers also observed that as students became more comfortable culturally (e.g., participating in family activities, joining community events), they grew more confident in speaking and listening, creating a virtuous cycle of improvement. The at-home teachers added that this synergy persisted after students returned: many were eager to continue improving English (some enrolled in extra speaking courses or took mock IELTS tests) because they had tasted real intercultural communication and wanted to be better prepared for future opportunities abroad.

Importantly, interviewees' observations align with theoretical models of intercultural development. Several students' growth trajectories reflected movement through Bennett's DMIS stages. For example, teachers noted that some initially hesitant students (pseudonyms "Zoe" and "Tan"), who struggled with language and avoided interaction early on, exhibited attitudes characteristic of the Denial/Defense stages (ethnocentric orientations). They were uneasy with the new cultural setting and tended to stick to what felt familiar. However, as the program progressed, these same students began to show signs of entering the Minimization and Acceptance stages: they started recognizing and accepting cultural differences, especially as their communicative ability grew. Student Y's active participation in both American and Chinese cultural traditions during the exchange illustrates a shift toward Acceptance, where cultural commonalities and differences are acknowledged openly. By the end of the sojourn, some high-proficiency students (e.g., "Yu" and "Guo") were even demonstrating behaviors consistent with the Adaptation stage. According to the teachers, these students became informal cultural mediators—helping peers interpret American customs and even translating or explaining when misunderstandings arose. Their strong English skills enabled them to adapt their behavior to the cultural context and empathize with perspectives different from their own. Moreover, their motivation to pursue further English certification (several scheduled IELTS exams soon after returning) suggests an internalized commitment to ongoing intercultural and

linguistic growth characteristic of the Integration tendency in the DMIS continuum.

It was also evident that progress was not strictly linear for every student—a point noted in both Bennett's model and Kim's (2001) intercultural adaptation spiral. Students sometimes oscillated between comfort and discomfort, or between confidence and setback, depending on the situation. For instance, a student might feel competent conversing about everyday topics (showing Adaptation-level ease), yet struggle and retreat when faced with a nuanced cultural discussion or a joke they didn't understand (temporarily back to Minimization or Defense in attitude). Such experiences echo Kim's idea of a spiraling process of adaptation, where each intercultural encounter (even challenging ones) contributes to a deeper, more resilient form of learning over time. The interviews provided rich examples of this iterative learning: one teacher noted how a particularly awkward misunderstanding at a family dinner initially embarrassed a student, but later that incident became a learning experience that the student laughed about and learned from in class discussions post-trip—a demonstration of one step back, two steps forward in the adaptation spiral.

In sum, the interview findings strongly reinforce the quantitative results and offer nuanced insight into RQ3. They confirm that gains in English oral proficiency and intercultural competence were intertwined: improved language skills opened the door to more meaningful cultural interactions, and those intercultural experiences in turn drove students to further improve their English. This reciprocal development acted as a catalyst for sustained growth even after the program ended. The study abroad experience thus served as both a trigger and a foundation for ongoing progress, illustrating how immersive learning can accelerate students' movement along the intercultural sensitivity continuum while simultaneously boosting language proficiency. These qualitative insights, interpreted through frameworks like DMIS and Kim's adaptation model, deepen our understanding of the mechanisms behind the statistical patterns, and underscore the pedagogical value of providing integrated language-and-culture experiences for adolescent learners.

Together, the findings from tests, surveys, and interviews provide a comprehensive answer to all three research questions: the program had a positive impact on English speaking/listening skills (RQ1) and intercultural competence (RQ2), and it demonstrated a dynamic interplay between linguistic and intercultural development (RQ3) that is crucial for informing future study abroad program design5. Discussions and implications

5. Discussion

The research findings reveal a compelling interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between developing oral English proficiency and intercultural

competence among Chinese students during study abroad. This relationship aligns with the OECD PISA global competence framework (OECD, 2018), which outlines dimensions like examining global issues, understanding multiple perspectives, effective intercultural interaction, and taking action for collective well-being as key aspects of global competence. For instance, the study abroad group exhibited rapid, moderate short-term gains in speaking immediately after the program, and a moderate delayed improvement in listening by six months (see Table 6).

In addition, based on the AIC-CHSS framework, the findings demonstrated development across four intercultural competence dimensions. Students demonstrated expanded knowledge through expressions of curiosity and metaphorical learning (e.g., "studying is like opening the door to the world"), reflecting Byram's (1997) conceptualization of savoirs. Heightened awareness emerged via cross-cultural comparisons, consistent with Bennett's (1986; 2009) DMIS, while attitude shifts from anxiety to resilience mirrored Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth cycle. Reported skill development (e.g., strategic tool use, clarification requests) exemplified Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) sociocultural theory of mediated language learning. Collectively, these findings illustrate the symbiotic relationship between linguistic practice and intercultural negotiation during immersion (Jackson, 2018), with students actively employing English while decoding cultural complexities.

The immersive study abroad experiences fostered gains in understanding and appreciating different cultural perspectives as students became more open-minded, confident and willing to use English. Students also exhibited improvements in intercultural communication skills, cultural knowledge, and engagement in cultural exchange. The current findings revealing an interdependent, reciprocal relationship between oral English proficiency and intercultural competence development among Chinese students abroad are substantiated by Wang and Teo's (2024) quantitative modeling and further enriches the integrated model proposed by Zhang and Yao (2020).

Further, the findings highlight the need to develop students' speaking skills for effective intercultural interaction, as explored by Jin and Cortazzi (2017b) who advocate for textbooks with critical and creative approaches to build competence in interacting across cultures– crucial for language learners to become globally competent citizens. The immersive study abroad context provides an ideal environment for this synergistic growth through constant English communication and cultural interactions (Jin & Cortazzi, 2023).

Crucially, the students' intercultural development followed the stages of Bennett's (1986; 2009) DMIS, with lower-proficiency learners (e.g., Zoe, Tan) initially exhibiting Denial and Defense behaviors—marked by withdrawal or resistance due to language barriers and cultural discomfort—before progressing to Minimization and Acceptance as they engaged with host families and school activities, demonstrating emerging empathy and recognition of cultural commonalities (e.g., student Y's dumpling exchange). Higher-proficiency students (e.g., Yu, Guo) reached the Adaptation stage, fluidly navigating cultural differences and acting as cultural mediators. Additionally, progress was nonlinear, aligning with Bennett's (1986; 2009) DMIS and Kim's (2001) adaptation spiral. Students oscillated between adaptation and retreat (e.g., fluent in casual conversations but struggling with nuanced cultural humor), reflecting Kim's spiral of iterative learning. Interview data revealed how initial setbacks—like misunderstood dinner conversations—later became reflective learning moments, embodying the "two steps forward, one step back" nature of intercultural development. Notably, this intercultural growth fostered motivation for language learning, while improved English proficiency, in turn, deepened cultural engagement, creating a reciprocal reinforcement cycle between linguistic and intercultural competence (Kim, 2001). The implications underscore the value of study abroad for holistically developing critical cross-cultural skills and global competence for different language levels.

Moreover, effective language program design should strategically combine intensive immersion with structured classroom learning to capitalize on their respective strengths in accelerating proficiency and ensuring long-term growth. For instance, short-term immersion accelerates initial oral proficiency gains through authentic practice and confidence-building—consistent with research on the cognitive and affective benefits of intensive language exposure (DeKeyser, 1991, 2014; Kinginger, 2009). In addition, sustained at-home instruction facilitates comparable long-term outcomes through structured learning. Bennett's (2009) DMIS provides a theoretical lens for interpreting these results: immersive learners demonstrated faster progression to advanced intercultural stages, likely due to the heightened linguistic and cultural demands of their environment (Jackson, 2018), whereas classroom-based learners exhibited more incremental development. Crucially, according to the findings, both pathways achieved similar proficiency levels within six months, affirming that while immersion effectively initiates competence (particularly in speaking), prolonged engagement—regardless of setting—is essential for consolidation and growth (Mitchell et al., 2017). Therefore, program design should maximize immersive experiences necessitating language use across diverse cultural contexts. Facilitating this reciprocal cycle through reflections, mentoring, and language support can optimize interdependent competency growth (OECD, 2018).

To holistically develop oral English proficiency and intercultural competence both before, during and after short-term study abroad, this paper concludes this comprehensive 'BRIDGE and SUPPORT' system. This

system aims to synergistically enhance language skills alongside the various IC dimensions of knowledge, attitudes, awareness and skills.

There are several components in this system (see Figure 6).

The BRIDGE components lay the groundwork by building participants' linguistic and cultural knowledge alongside critical self-awareness. Baseline assessments serve as critical diagnostic tools to establish participants' initial language proficiency and intercultural competence levels prior to educational interventions. These multidimensional evaluations typically incorporate standardized language tests (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) alongside validated intercultural competence instruments such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, 2023). Such pre-program assessments not only identify individual developmental starting points but also enable the customization of pedagogical approaches to address specific learner needs (Deardorff, 2011). Reflective practices, when systematically integrated into language and culture learning, facilitate critical engagement with one's linguistic and cultural identity formation. Through structured journaling, guided discussions, and portfolio development, learners engage in meta-cognitive processes that enhance their cultural self-awareness—a foundational element in DMIS (Bennett, 1993). This intentional reflection helps learners recognize how their cultural frameworks influence communication patterns, thereby reducing ethnocentric tendencies and fostering the cognitive flexibility necessary for effective intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).
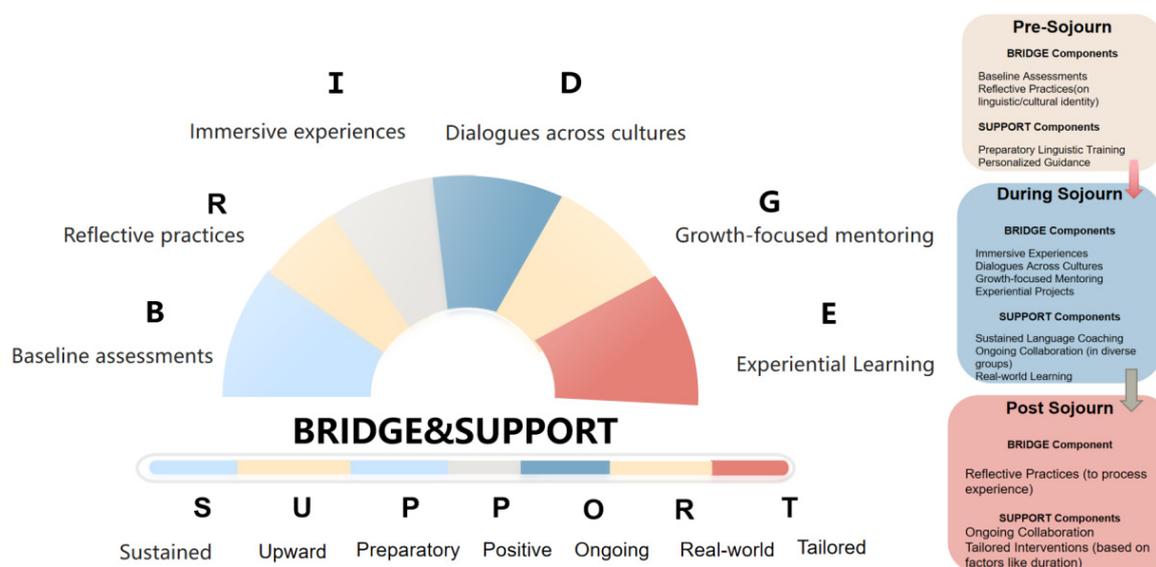

Figure 6. BRIDGE&SUPPORT system for SA program.

In addition, immersive experiences constitute the transformative core of intercultural development, providing authentic contexts where emerging language skills intersect with real-world cultural learning. These situated learning opportunities—whether through study abroad, service learning, or community engagement—create what Lave and Wenger (1991) term "legitimate peripheral participation" in target language communities. The daily necessity of navigating cross-cultural interactions accelerates both linguistic competence (particularly in pragmatics and fluency) and cultural understanding through what Mezirow (1991) describes as transformative learning experiences. Research by Kinginger (2008) demonstrates how such immersion leads to qualitatively different learning outcomes compared to classroom instruction alone, as learners develop not just knowledge about culture, but the embodied capacity for cultural adaptation and intercultural mediation (Jackson, 2018).

The SUPPORT components constitute a scaffolded framework designed to cultivate both the affective dispositions and pragmatic abilities essential for effective intercultural communication. Grounded in theories of intercultural competence development (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), these pedagogical interventions prioritize positive attitude formation—such as openness, curiosity, and tolerance for ambiguity—while simultaneously honing functional communication strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, clarification requests) that facilitate successful meaning-making across cultural boundaries (Fantini, 2018). Preparatory linguistic training builds core language foundations crucial for meaningful cross-cultural interactions. Such training aligns with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), emphasizing how scaffolded language practice prepares learners for Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) growth during immersion (Heo, 2022). Personalized language coaching tailored to individual needs and levels guides systematic development of oral proficiency.

Once immersed, sustained coaching allows applying classroom learning to real-world practice maximizing linguistic gains and intercultural learning (Kinginger, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2017). Further, ongoing collaboration in diverse groups provides ample opportunities for negotiating meaning across linguistic and cultural differences that heterogeneous group work accelerates both language acquisition and intercultural sensitivity (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

The synergistic integration of language and intercultural learning creates a mutually reinforcing pedagogical ecosystem that facilitates parallel development in both domains. Grounded in Byram's (1997) ICC model, this approach recognizes that linguistic proficiency and intercultural understanding are not discrete skills but rather interdependent dimensions of effective cross-cultural communication. Dialogues across cultures serve as a critical mechanism in this process, providing authentic contexts for learners to practice oral expression while simultaneously expanding their intercultural knowledge and cultivating attitudes of openness (Deardorff, 2006). Growth-focused mentoring plays a pivotal role in this developmental process by fostering metacognitive awareness of one's linguistic and cultural positioning. Through guided reflection, learners develop the capacity to recognize how their native language and cultural frameworks shape their communication patterns (Bennett, 1993). This heightened self-awareness, central to the DMIS, enables more mindful and adaptive communication strategies in intercultural encounters (Hammer, 2023). Experiential projects purposefully embed opportunities to exercise oral English skills within rich cultural contexts. Such projects, informed by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, create cycles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This upward spiral allows language gains and intercultural competence growth to reciprocally reinforce each other.

In the pre-sojourn phase, the emphasis is on building fundamental linguistic competence through preparatory training while raising self-awareness about linguistic identity via reflective activities. During immersion, a diverse array of interaction-rich experiences provides an immersive environment to apply oral skills. Support components provide individualized coaching, collaborative tasks, and process-oriented mentoring to continuously refine linguistic expression while bridging understanding across linguistic and cultural divides. Post-sojourn interventions like virtual exchanges consolidate linguistic gains by necessitating cross-cultural expression of ideas.

This unified system purposefully interweaves language learning with developing the multidimensional knowledge, attitudes, awareness and skills crucial for intercultural competence. By creating opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural communication at every stage, it catalyzes an upward spiral where language and IC propel each other's growth—comprehensively enhancing participants' ability to communicate fluidly across linguistic and cultural borders.

6. Conclusions

This mixed-methods study explored the impact of a four-week American high school study abroad program on Chinese students' English oral proficiency and intercultural competence. Quantitative results showed significant improvements in self-reported cultural experiences, intercultural competence, and IELTS speaking and listening scores post-program. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, highlighting increased confidence in English communication, heightened cultural awareness, and appreciation for diversity. The study underscores the interplay between language proficiency and intercultural competence, suggesting that enhanced English skills facilitate cross-cultural interactions, while improved cultural understanding aids effective communication. The 'BRIDGE and SUPPORT' system proposed aims to promote oral English and intercultural competencies through purposeful integration of language learning and cross-cultural communication opportunities. The study's limitations include a small sample size and focus on Chinese perspectives. It implies the need for comprehensive evaluation methods for short-term study abroad program outcomes and suggests future research on long-term impacts and effective pedagogical approaches. Overall, the study suggests that short-term study abroad programs can foster language proficiency and intercultural competence among Chinese high school students, preparing them for global participation and contributing to intercultural understanding and global cooperation.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Chat GPT to check for grammatical errors. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Appendix A. Pre-Sojourn Questionnaire

Pre-Sojourn Questionnaire (行前问卷调查)

Dear students (各位同学大家好),

The much-anticipated trip to America is about to begin. To make adequate preparations before departure, here are some questions about the recently concluded pre-departure orientation session and the upcoming trip. Please complete them carefully (令人期待的美国海外课堂之旅即将启程，为了做好出行前的充分准备， 以下是关于刚刚结束的行前培训会和此次出行安排的一些问题调研，请大家认真完成).

Note: This survey aims to prepare for the trip. The data and information will be used for research related to this trip and will not be used for other purposes (注: 该问卷调查旨为此次行程做好准备工作, 数据和信息将用于与此次行程相关的调研, 不会用于其他用途).

Informed Consent (知情同意)

( ) I am informed and voluntarily agree to participate in this survey (我已知情, 自愿完成此次问卷调研).

( ) I am informed, but do not wish to participate in or answer this survey (我已知情, 不愿意参与此次问卷调研).

1. Your age (你的年龄)
2. Your gender (你的性别)
3. Your grade (你的年级)
4. Have you had any experience traveling abroad from 2019–2023 (请问你在 2019–2023 年间是否有过出国经历)?
   A. Yes (是)
   B. No (否)
5. If yes, when was your most recent trip abroad? How long did you go for? Which country or countries did you visit? (是—最近一次出国是什么时候? 去了多久? 去了哪个 (哪些) 国家?)
6. How much do you know about America (你对于美国是否有所了解)?
   A. Not at all (完全不了解)
   B. A little (了解少数)
   C. Some (了解一些)
   D. A lot (了解较多)
   E. Very well (非常了解)
7. Do you think this trip will improve your English communication skills (你觉得此次出行是否会对自己的英语交流能力有所提升)?
   A. Not at all (完全不会)
   B. A little (会有少许)
   C. Some (会有一些)
   D. A lot (会提升较多)
   E. Greatly (会提升很大)
8. Which part(s) of this trip's itinerary are you most looking forward to (此次行程安排中最让你期待的部分是哪些 (哪个))?
   _____
9. What are your biggest concerns during this trip (此次出行期间你最担心的问题是什么)?
   A. Language communication
   B. Cultural adaptation
   C. Communication with the host family
   D. Classroom Learning
   E. Get along with the American classmates
   F. Homesickness

G. Other _____

10. Who will you seek help from if you encounter difficulties during the trip (此次行程中遇见困难你会向谁寻求帮助)? (Multiple choice (多选题))

A. The accompanying teachers (同行的带队老师)

B. Fellow students (同行的同学)

C. Parents back home (国内家长)

D. Host family (美国住家)

E. Emergency contact number (紧急联系电话)

11. Please choose the option that best fits your actual situation (请根据你的实际情况选择最符合的项):

Questions/Options 题目/选项	1	2	3	4	5
Language and culture 语言文化					
Food culture 饮食文化					
Social norms 社会习俗					
Education system 教育制度					
Host family life 住家生活					
experience					

1—Not looking forward to it (不期待), 2—a little (少许期待), 3—Somewhat (有一些期待), 4—Quite a bit (较多期待), 5—Very much (非常期待).

12. What did you gain from the recent pre-departure meeting (刚才的行前会你有哪些收获)?

_____

Thank you for participating in this survey. This survey has been approved by the department. It will help us prepare well for the upcoming program (感谢您参与此次问卷调查，本调查已经通过学院同意，用于帮助做好此次行前准备).

Appendix B. During Sojourn Questionnaire

During Sojourn Questionnaire (行中问卷调查)

Question 1: Name 2–3 memorable things from the trip (a brief description is fine). [Fill-in-the-blank] (第 1 题 旅程中让你印象深刻的 2–3 件事(简单叙述即可) [填空题])

_____

Question 2: What challenges/difficulties did you encounter during this trip? [Multiple choice] (第 2 题 此次旅程中你遇到了什么挑战/困难? [多选题])

A. Language challenges/difficulties (语言挑战/困难)

B. Unfamiliar with the food (饮食不习惯)

C. Different life style of the host family (住家生活方式不同)

D. Different classroom requirement in the US classroom (美国课堂学习要求不同)

E. Other (其他)

Question 3: How did you overcome these challenges/difficulties? [Fill-in-the-blank] (以上困难/挑战你是怎样克服的? [填空题])

_____

Question 4: Up until now, has participating in this overseas program improved your English language ability? [Single choice] (目前为止，参与此次海外课程对于你的英语语言能力是否有所提升? [单选题])

A. No improvement (没有提升)

B. Unfamiliar with the food (饮食不习惯)

C. Different life style of the host family (住家生活方式不同)

D. Different classroom requirement in the US classroom (美国课堂学习要求不同)

E. Other (其他)

Question 5: Studying in the United States is like _____ because _____ (e.g., Studying in the United States is like reading an interesting book because there are many eye-opening discoveries) (在美国的学习就像_____ 因为 _____ (如: 在美国的学习就像读一本有趣的书, 因为有很多让人耳目一新的发现). [Fill-in-the-blank] ([填空题])

Question 6: Life in the United States is like _____ because _____ (e.g., Life in the United States is like playing in an amusement park, because there are many novel and interesting discoveries) (在美国的生活就像_____ 因为 _____ (如: 在美国的生活就像在游乐场游玩, 因为有很多新奇和有趣的发现). [Fill-in-the-blank] ([填空题])

Appendix C. Post Sojourn Questionnaire

Post Sojourn Questionnaire (行后问卷调查)

Informed Consent (知情同意)

Research Topic: A Four-Week American High School Study Abroad Program's Impact on Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence and English Oral Proficiency. (研究主题: 四周制美国高中游学项目对中国学生跨文化适应能力与英语听说水平的影响).

Thank you for participating in this research questionnaire. When you begin this questionnaire, you indicate that you understand the subject, content and the purpose of this research and agree to participate; the information collected will be kept confidential and analysed by the researchers; any information that might identify you personally will not be released; participation in this survey will/will not result in compensation for time, inconvenience, expenses, etc. (感谢您的参与! 开始本调查问卷表明您同意参与本研究, 并同意以下内容: 我了解本研究的主题, 内容和目的并同意参与, 且可以随时停止做问卷; 收集的信息将被保密, 被研究人员进行研究; 问卷中获得的任何可能识别您个人身份的信息都不会被公开; 参与本次调查不会得到时间, 不便, 费用等方面的补偿).

This informed consent form is not a contract. My guardian I have fully understood the above research methods and their possible benefits and risks. Any questions regarding this research project have been explained and explained in detail. I agree to be a voluntary research participant in this research project (本知情同意书并非一份合同. 本人及本人的法定监护人已充分了解上述研究方法及其可能的益处与风险, 有关本研究计划的疑问, 皆已获得详细说明与解释. 本人同意成为本研究计划的自愿研究参与者).

Researcher (研究人员): Jing Huang (黄晶)

Intercultural Competence of Chinese High School Students (中国中学生跨文化能力测评问卷)

Class (班级): _____ Name (姓名): _____ Date (日期): _____

This section is designed to collect your self-evaluation of your intercultural competence. According to your understanding, choose the most appropriate answer from 1 to 5 about your objective and universal intercultural competence, where: 1 = Very Low, 2 = Low, 3 = Average, 4 = High, 5 = Very High (本问卷旨在收集你对自身跨文化能力的自我评估。根据您的理解, 从 1 到 5 中选择最合适的答案来评估你的客观和普遍的跨文化能力, 其中：1 = 非常低，2 = 低，3 = 中等，4 =高，5 = 非常高).

Dimension 维度	Description 描述	1 = Very Low 1 = 非常低	2 = Low 2 = 低	3 = Average 3 = 中等	4 = High 4 = 高	5 = Very High 5 = 非常高
1. KN-A 对于本国的了解	(1a) understanding native history 理解我国的历史					
	(1b) understanding native social norms 理解我国的社会规范					
	(1c) understanding the native sense of values 理解我国的价值观念					
2. KN-B 对于外国的了解	(2a) understanding foreign knowledge of history 了解外国历史知识					
	(2b) understanding foreign social norms 了解外国的社会规范					
	(2c) understanding the foreign sense of values 了解外国的价值观念					
	(2d) understanding foreign cultural taboos 了解外国的文化禁忌					

	(2e) understanding foreigners' speech 理解外国人的言谈					
3．AT 跨文化沟通的态度	(3a) willingness to learn from those who differ from one's self and culture 愿意向与自己文化背景不同的人学习					
	(3b) willingness to respect foreigners' lifestyles and customs 尊重外国人的生活方式和习俗					
	(3c) willingness to learn foreign languages and cultures well 愿意学好外语和外国文化					
4．SK-A 跨文化沟通技巧	(4a) the skill of consulting with foreigners when misunderstandings occur 具有当误解发生时，与外国人协商的技巧					
	(4b) the skill of communicating with foreigners using body language or other nonverbal communication when it is difficult to communicate using language 具有在语言交流困难时，使用肢体语言或其他非 言语沟通与外国人交流的技巧					
	(4c) the skill of successfully communicating with foreigners 具有与外国人成功沟通的技巧					
	(4d) the skill of treating foreigners politely 具有礼貌对待外国人的技巧					
	(4e) the skill of avoiding offending foreigners with inappropriate words and behavior 可以避免使用不当的言语和行为冒犯外国人					
	(4f) the skill of avoiding prejudice against foreigners 可以避免对外国人持有偏见					
	(4g) the skill of avoiding violating foreigners' privacy 可以避免侵犯外国人隐私					
	(4h) the skill of having intercultural sensitivity 具有跨文化交流的敏感性					
4. SK-B 跨文化认知技巧	(5a) the skill of acquiring knowledge of other cultures from foreigners 具有从外国人那里获取其他文化知识的技巧					
	(5b) the skill of learning intercultural communication strategies 具有学习跨文化交流策略的技巧					
	(5c) the skill of learning how to manage cultural conflicts 具有学会如何处理文化冲突的技巧					
6. AW 跨文化沟通意识	(6a) realizing cultural differences and similarities when communicating with foreigners 在与外国人交流时意识到文化的差异和相似之处					
	(6b) realizing the differences in cultural identity when communicating with foreigners 在与外国人交流时意识到文化身份的差异					
	(6c) judging cultural situations from both one's own and the other's cultural perspective 能够从自己和对方的文化视角判断文化情境					

Appendix D. Interview Consent Form and Guiding Questions

Interview Consent Form (知情同意)

Research topic: A Four-Week American High School Study Abroad Program's Impact on Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence and English Oral Proficiency. (研究主题: 四周制美国高中游学项目对中国学生跨文化适应能力与英语听说水平的影响)

Researcher (研究人员): Jing Huang (黄晶)

As part of the above research project, we would like to thank you for participating. The interview will take about 3–5 min. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you are aware of the purpose and conditions of your participation. Upon signing this form, you are confirming that after reading the information sheet you agree with the following

statements (作为上述研究项目的一部分，我们衷心感谢您的参与。本次访谈预计耗时 3 至 5 分钟。本知情同意书旨在确保您充分了解参与研究的目的与条件。签署本文件即表明您已阅读说明文件，并同意以下条款)：

I understand the purpose of this research and agree to participate, and I can stop at any time or ask the researcher to delete some content after the interview (我理解这项研究的目的并同意参与，且可在任何时候停止参与，或在访谈结束后要求研究人员删除部分内容).

The interview will be recorded, transcribed and kept confidential (本次访谈将被录音、转录并严格保密).

My words may be summarized or directly quoted, and will be analysed by the research investigators (我的发言可能被摘要或直接引用，并由研究人员进行分析).

All summaries and direct quotations from the interview will remain anonymous (所有访谈摘要及直接引语均将保持匿名).

Any other information obtained during the interview that could be used to identify you will not be made public (访谈中获取的任何其他可能识别您身份的信息均不会公开).

I may contact the investigator(s) at any time with further questions (我可能随时联系研究人员提出进一步问题).

Participant(s) Signature (参与者签名): _____ Date (日期): _____

Researcher(s) Signature (研究人员签名): _____Date (日期): _____

Guiding Questions for Students of SA Group

1. During your study abroad experience, how did your developing English oral skills(listening & speaking) help you better understand and engage with the local culture, customs, and people's lifestyles? (在海外课程学习期间，英语听说能力的提高是怎样帮你更好地了解和融入当地的生活和文化的)

2. In what ways did your increased intercultural understanding and knowledge about American history and values influence your ability to communicate more effectively in English in various contexts (你觉得对美国文化和历史的了解有没有帮助你在不同的场合下更有效地使用英语)?

3. Has the improvement in your English listening and speaking skills helped you introduce your own country's culture to foreigners? How has it helped? (英语听说能力的提高是否对于你向外国人介绍自己的本国文化有所帮助？怎样帮助?)

4. Can you describe a specific situation or interaction where your improvements in both English oral proficiency and intercultural competence complemented each other, allowing you to navigate a cultural misunderstanding or conflict more successfully? (有没有哪一次具体的经历，你感觉到你的英语和跨文化交流能力的提升帮助你成功地解决了一个文化误解或冲突?)

5. Looking back on your study abroad experience, how would you assess the interplay between your developing English oral proficiency and your ability to acquire knowledge, understand values, and adapt to the local culture over the course of the four-week program? (回顾你的海外课程学习经历，你如何评价你的英语听说提升和你适应当地文化的能力之间的关系?)

6. After returning from the study abroad program, how have you been able to apply the communication strategies or intercultural knowledge you acquired to enhance your English language learning or interactions with diverse individuals? (回来之后，你怎样应用学到的交流技巧或者跨文化知识来提高你的英语水平或者与各种背景的人打交道?)

Guiding Questions for Teachers of SA Group

1. Based on your own SA experience, what changes did you observe in the SA group students' English oral proficiency and intercultural competence over the course of the four-week program? (作为教师，你觉得学生在这四周的留学期间，他们的英语听说和跨文化能力有什么变化?)

2. How did you perceive the relationship between the students' developing English oral skills and their ability to navigate cultural differences or engage in intercultural interactions during the SA program? (你怎么看待学生英语听说能力的提升和他们处理文化差异的能力之间的关系?)

3. What specific situations or activities during the SA program seemed to facilitate the simultaneous growth of English oral proficiency and intercultural understanding among the students? (在海外课程期间，有哪些情况或活动特别有助于学生同时提升英语和跨文化理解?)

4. After the SA program ended, did you notice any continued interplay or reinforcement between the students' improved English oral skills and their intercultural competence back in the classroom setting? (项目结束后，你有没有发现学生在课堂上英语和跨文化能力有继续提升或相互加强的情况?)

Guiding Questions for Teachers of AH Group

1. What differences, if any, did you observe in the English oral proficiency and intercultural competence of the SA group students compared to their peers who did not participate in the program? (您是否观察到参与该项目的 SA 小组学生与未参加该项目的同学在英语听力/口语能力和跨文化能力方面有何不同?)
2. How did the SA group students' experiences abroad seem to influence their classroom participation or interactions with classmates from diverse backgrounds? (SA 小组学生的海外经历是如何影响他们在课堂上的参与或与同学的交流?)
3. From your observations, did the SA group students demonstrate an ability to apply their enhanced English oral skills and intercultural understanding within the classroom context? (根据您的观察, SA 小组学生是否展示了在课堂环境中应用其提升的英语听说技能和跨文化理解的能力?)

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