

Intercultural Competence in the Chinese-Speaking Study Abroad Context

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Abstract

This study of intercultural competence in Chinese-speaking study abroad (SA) context involved 72 international students studying Chinese as a second language in college language centers in China and Taiwan. Two research questions are addressed: “What kinds of intercultural competence do students who study Chinese as a second language abroad possess?”, and “Do the SA students’ intercultural competence differ based on the following factors: (1) gender, (2) length of stay in the Chinese-speaking community, (3) previous SA experience, and (4) self-rated Chinese proficiency level?”. Factor analysis and MANOVA tests were run based on the participants’ answers to the Intercultural Abilities questionnaire. The results of the factor analysis test showed that the participants had three components of intercultural competence, namely, intercultural skill and the awareness of the importance of intercultural competence while in the host culture, intercultural attitude and the awareness of the effect of inter-culture and its development, and intercultural knowledge. The results of the MANOVA test found a significant interactive effect between the participants’ self-rated Chinese proficiency levels and their previous study abroad experience on intercultural knowledge.

1 Introduction

Studying abroad (SA) is believed to benefit language learners in many ways. Viewing SA from a second language acquisition perspective, Dewey (2017) states that it not only creates opportunities for language input and output, but also provides sociocultural settings where meaningful social interactions occur, which might help build on one’s intercultural competence. Indeed, the major difference between SA and studying at a home program can take the metaphors of “street learners” versus “classroom learners” (Swain, 1985). Swain explains that meaningful output is often absent in the home classroom settings including immersion programs. In contrast, in an SA setting, language and intercultural learning occurs in an authentic context where learners are expected to engage in social interactions in order to function in the target community. Hence, as Dewey describes, “interaction with and scaffolding by others in one’s environment is a key component of SA in line with sociocultural theory” (p. 50). Nonetheless, as technology advances and the world turns into a global village, the ways of SA are impacted. Recent SA studies have documented some dramatic learner behavioral changes in the SA settings. For example, Kinginger (2009) was astonished by her observation on how the SA participants in her study used technology to block out potential communication in their surroundings (e.g. using podcast libraries or iPod in their native languages) or chose to

stay in their more comfortable social network (e.g. interacting online with friends and family from home) instead of from the local social networks. Similar study findings ring true in other SA studies (Kinginger, 2008; Hanson & Dracos, 2016). As new technologies develop, it seems that there is a need to re-investigate how intercultural competence is developed in SA settings in the new digital era. Hence, this study hopes to add to the current literature by investigating the intercultural competence of students in Chinese-speaking SA context and the factors influencing the competence.

2 Intercultural competence

Learning a foreign language involves not only acquiring the linguistic skills, but also having the ability to communicate in culturally appropriate ways in the target language environment. In order to act in culturally appropriate ways, the first step is to gain sufficient target cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge in language learning is often referred to in terms of big-C culture (e.g. literature, music, theater and film, and celebration) and little-c culture (e.g. beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, pattern of interaction, body language, and the use of physical space) (Alatis, Strachle, Gallenberger, & Ronkin, 1996). A metaphor that describes the different kinds of knowledge embedded in big-C and little-C culture is that of a cultural iceberg, in which the big-C knowledge is easy to recognize on the surface, while the little-c knowledge is hidden under the surface level. Irimia (2012) stated that many aspects of little-c culture are internalized and subconscious acts, which could be easily overlooked unless they are analyzed in contrast with a different culture. Nevertheless, becoming an intercultural competent learner, which is having knowledge of big-C culture, and knowing ways to adapt to little-c culture, is of great importance to avoid any miscommunication or conflict. For example, Ting-Toomey and Kurongi's study (1998) pinpointed that in the Chinese business context, the facework competence, which refers to the ability to carry out "clusters of communicative behaviors that are used to enact self-face and to uphold, challenge/threaten, or support the other person's face" (p. 190), is an essential part of the intercultural competence. Other major sub-components of the intercultural competence specific to the Chinese business context identified by Chinese scholars (He & Wang, 2014; Gao & Wu, 2007; Luo, 2013) include cognitive ability, emotional management, and communication skills. In sum, in order to be an intercultural competent individual, Fantini (2007) stated that one needs to have "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 9). Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) categorized the complex intercultural abilities into four critical elements: *knowledge*, *skills*, *attitudes*, and *awareness*. *Knowledge* refers to knowing the social processes and the people (e.g. how social groups and identities function), and how others might perceive the learner. *Skills* include the ability to compare, interpret, and relate to cultures, and the ability to gain new cultural knowledge and to operate on that knowledge. *Attitudes* refer to the curiosity and openness to other cultures and not to believe that one's own culture is the only possible and correct way of seeing and doing things. *Awareness* is the ability to be aware of one's own cultural values and how the values influence their views of others. The current study used the four elements as guides to analyze the data. Moreover, Fantini further elaborated that many components, such as one's target language proficiency or characteristics, are related to intercultural competence and need to be considered when investigating intercultural competence. Hence, in this study, the relationship between intercultural competence and four components including gender, length of SA stay, Chinese language proficiency and previous SA experience, were investigated.

3 Studies in intercultural competence

One common method in researching students' intercultural competence is to investigate its development by gathering self-rated intercultural competence surveys before and after studying abroad. For instance, several studies (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Engle & Engle, 2004; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004) investigated the impact of either short-term (a few weeks) or long-term (a year) SA programs on the development of intercultural competence and reported that the short-term participants began to show more willingness to accept cultural differences;

however, higher level of intercultural competence only developed in the long-term groups. While the studies aforementioned, with a focus on American students, reported positive findings, other studies conducted in different contexts also found SA to be a positive experience to develop intercultural competence. For example, Ramirez's (2016) study used a pre-post design and the use of control groups with Colombian college participants who studied abroad for a semester. The measurements of intercultural competence after SA were significantly different between the SA groups and the control groups who stayed in their home country. The researcher reported that the SA experience contributed to all four dimensions (strategy, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral) of intercultural competence measured and it could be concluded that the SA experience enhanced the development of the participants' intercultural competence.

Studies which took a qualitative method confirm with the findings of the quantitative studies that the length of SA experience seemed to assist learners in gaining different levels of intercultural competence. For instance, Root and Ngampornchai (2013) analyzed American students' post-reflection papers after an average of five- to eight-week short-term SA and found that even though the participants noticed cultural differences, which enhanced their cross-cultural knowledge, these acknowledgments were only at superficial levels without any understanding of values or assumptions rooted deeply in the culture. In support of Root and Ngampornchai's findings, Giovanangeli and Oguro's (2016) analysis of the interview results from a group of Australian students who were working on their degree in Francophone studies in France and Switzerland for a long-term SA (one academic year) illustrated that the participants were not able to deeply understand the local cultural values or actively engage with the local people and events until after six months of stay.

While the studies with various contexts mentioned above found length of stay to be a possible predictor of intercultural competence gain, other studies had mixed findings. For example, Schartner (2016) followed a multinational group of international graduate students studying for nine months in England and found that parts of the participants' intercultural competence (e.g. cultural empathy and open mindedness) decreased significantly. Jackson's (2009) study is in support of Schartner's claim. Jackson studied a group of students from Hong Kong studying in England. Through interviews, journals, surveys, and field notes, the researcher concluded that length of stay in the host culture did not promise the development of intercultural competence.

Other components, which might possibly influence the development of intercultural competence, have not been as widely researched in the literature as the component of length of stay in SA context. One of the components is gender. According to Kim and Goldstein's (2005) study on intercultural attitudes toward future SA experience among college students, female students were more positive toward their SA experience, less ethnocentric and with less intercultural communication apprehension, and greater language interest, which might indicate more open-mindedness toward gaining intercultural competence while abroad. Another component worthy of attention is target language proficiency level. Having a good level of target language proficiency would reduce the loss of information in a second language with fewer misunderstandings in interactions with others (Sercu, 2002; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Those with more advanced language proficiency should be expected to have less communication obstacles to develop their intercultural competence. The last component which needs attention is one's prior travel experience. The findings on whether students have previous SA experience and its relationship with the students' gain of intercultural competence are inconsistent in current literature. While a few studies (Martin, 1987, Oppen, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Warnock & Melnychuk, 2018) found that previous travel experience enhanced the participants' willingness to join future SA trips and the ability to gain intercultural competence, Carlson, Burn, and Yachimowicz (1990) found no effect of previous travels on the current one.

The review of the SA research on intercultural competence above illustrates that findings were inconsistent with the component of the length of SA stay and that the influence of other components such as gender, previous travel experience, and target language proficiency are understudied. Moreover, based on the results of Yang's (2016) meta-analysis of study abroad research, out of the 66 English-written study abroad research articles from 1991 to 2016, the common focus of the target languages was English and Spanish, and the main emphasis was on U.S. English-speaking students' learning experiences abroad. Yang (2016) further argued that while current SA literature focuses on

US students, 80% of the international students in the globe are Asian and called for research to investigate target languages other than English by non-English-speaking students. Informed by the current literature, this study attempted to fill this gap by involving international learners of Chinese as a second language in China and Taiwan.

4 Research questions

The current literature discussed in the previous section has shown that there is limited understanding and inconsistencies in study results about international learners' intercultural competence and the possible effects of length of stay in the target language community, gender, target language proficiency, and previous travel experiences on intercultural competence. The present study intended to build on the current literature and to gain more understanding of Chinese as a second language students studying abroad in China and Taiwan. This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What kinds of intercultural competence do students who study Chinese as a second language abroad possess?
2. Do the SA students' intercultural competence differ based on the following factors: (1) gender, (2) length of stay in the Chinese-speaking community, (3) previous SA experience, and (4) self-rated Chinese proficiency level?

5 Participants

This study involved 72 international students studying abroad in China and Taiwan. Participants were recruited from Chinese language centers in two universities, one located in Eastern China, and the other in central Taiwan. Among the 72 participants, 28 were males and 44 were females, who spoke 21 different native languages (Arabic, Czech, Embu, English, French, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Mauritanian, Mongolian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Thai, Turkish, Uzbek, Vietnamese, and Ukrainian). Their age ranged from 18 to 58 ($M = 23$, $SD = 5.9$). Forty-four of the participants were undergraduate students, while 24 of them were graduate students and four of them were non-degree seeking language students.

6 Instruments

This study utilized a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. The first part of the questionnaire collected participants' demographic information including age, native language, gender, length of current SA experience, previous SA experience, and self-rated Chinese language proficiency level. The second part of the questionnaire adopted Fantini's (2007) Intercultural Abilities questionnaire to investigate the construct of the participants' intercultural competence. The development of the questionnaire was based on an extensive and holistic review of the current intercultural competence literature and covered the four elements of intercultural competence described by Byram et al. (2002) mentioned in the Intercultural Competence section. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study by Fantini, which yielded excellent reliability of inter-item consistency of the individual items.

7 Analysis

All of the statistical tests were run by SPSS software version 25.0, which had a minimum conventional level of significance of $p = 0.05$. In order to answer the first question, "What kinds of intercultural competence do students who study Chinese abroad possess?", Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation was used to investigate the commonalities among the 53 intercultural ability items listed in the survey. The purpose of using this method was to reduce the number of variables to more easily visualize and summarize the information. Reliability tests were run for the

survey and for each single factor to determine the internal consistency of the items. In order to answer the second research question, “Do the SA students’ intercultural competence differ based on the following factors: (1) gender, (2) length of stay in the Chinese-speaking community, (3) previous SA experience, and (4) self-rated Chinese proficiency level?”, MANOVA, which can test the effect of one or more independent variables on multiple dependent variables, was run. In this study, the dependent variables were the three components of intercultural abilities identified in the factor analysis test. The independent variables were gender, length of stay in the Chinese-speaking community, previous SA experience, and self-rated Chinese proficiency level. The null hypothesis that gender, length of stay, previous SA experience, and proficiency level, did not have an effect on the components of the participants’ intercultural abilities, was assumed in the tests. For MANOVA analyses, the participants were divided in groups in the following ways. The gender variable consisted of two groups: male and female. The length of stay variable consisted of three groups: participants who had stayed less than one year, participants who had stayed between one and two years, and participants who had stayed more than two years. For the variable of previous SA experience, one group had no previous SA experience, while the other had at least one SA experience studying a foreign language prior to Chinese. For the proficiency variable, participants’ self-rated Chinese levels in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (1 = novice, 2 = intermediate, 3 = advanced, and 4 = superior), were averaged and were divided into three groups (novice, intermediate, and advanced) by their averaged overall proficiency scores. The novice group’s score was below 1.5. The intermediate group’s score was between 1.6 and 2.5. The advanced group’s score was above 2.5. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics of the divided groups for each factor.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the groups in the MANOVA test

Independent Variables	Categories	N
Gender	Male	28
	Female	44
Length of Stay	Less than 1 year	42
	Between 1 and 2 years	21
	More than 2 years	9
Previous SA Experience	No experience	19
	At least studied a foreign language in the target language community prior to Chinese	53
Chinese Proficiency	Novice	12
	Intermediate	35
	Advanced	25

8 Results

8.1 Factor Analysis

The result of the internal consistency reliability of the 53 survey items showed that the Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91 with $F(71, 52) = 4.427, p = 0.000$ indicating that the items had a good internal consistency. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.852, which supported the factorability of these data. The significance level of Bartlett test of Sphericity = 0.000 indicated that these data were approximately multivariate thus a factor analysis may be useful with the data. The result of the factor analysis showed five components with eigenvalues exceeding one. The scree plot illustrated that three components were on the steep portion of the graph with eigenvalues exceeding two, therefore, the three components were retained for further investigation. The result of the varimax rotation showed that 52 items moderately or strongly loaded on one of the three components. The subsequent three-component solution explained 65% of the variance, with Component 1 contributing 25%, Component 2 contributing 25%, and Component 3 contributing 15%.

As shown in Table 2, Component 1, which includes 21 items, is loaded heavily on intercultural skill and the awareness of the importance of intercultural competence while in the host culture. Intercultural skill refers to the skills of comparing, interpreting, and relating ideas, events, and documents from different cultures, and the skills of discovering new cultural knowledge and integrating it with the existing knowledge. For instance, how much the participants believed that they had the ability to use appropriate strategies to learn the Chinese culture and language, to resolve any cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings, and to adjust their behavior to avoid offending the people in the Chinese culture, were all related to their level of intercultural skill. On the other hand, the awareness of the importance of intercultural competence while in the host culture includes items that describe the importance of recognizing differences and similarities between cultures and using the intercultural ability to understand one's own and others' views and values while staying in the host culture. Some examples include how much the participants were willing to modify their behaviors to fit the Chinese culture, and how much the participants realized the importance of how the Chinese culture views the participants and how varied situations in the Chinese culture required modifying their interactions with others.

Component 2 also includes 21 items, which is loaded on intercultural attitude and the awareness of the effect of inter-culture and its development. Intercultural attitude, which is considered the foundation of intercultural competence (Byram et al., 2002), refers to one's willingness to be open to other cultures and relativize one's own culture. Attitudes such as the willingness to try to understand the Chinese culture, to adapt behaviors to communicate appropriately, and to suspend judgment, are examples of intercultural attitude. The other part of Component 2, the awareness of the effect of inter-culture and its development, contains items that describe the awareness of one's own cultural values and level of intercultural development and how they influence their perspectives toward others' values and vice versa. The items that illustrated how much the participants realized the dangers of generalizing individual behaviors as representative of the whole culture, the fact that personal values would affect one's approach to ethical dilemmas and their resolutions, the effect of varying communication styles in social and working situations, and how one's values and ethics were reflected in specific situations, all belong to the awareness of the effect of inter-culture and its development.

Component 3 includes ten items describing intercultural knowledge, which includes the knowledge of the social practices and products in one's own and in other cultures, and the knowledge about people of other cultures and how they are likely to view you. The participants' knowledge such as knowing how to describe behaviors common among the Chinese culture, to contrast their own behaviors with those of their hosts in important areas, and to describe a model of cross-cultural adjustment, illustrated their level of intercultural knowledge.

Table 2. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation of three-factor solution for the SA learners' intercultural competence

	Item-total correlation	Factor loading	H2	M (SD)
Component 1 Intercultural skill and the awareness of the importance of intercultural competence while in the host culture.	Cronbach's alpha= .933			
31. I used models, strategies, and techniques that aided my learning of the host language and culture	.698	.747	.830	3.53 (.949)
29. I demonstrated a capacity to interact appropriately in a variety of different social situations in the host culture	.641	.744	.792	3.58 (1.00)
30. I used appropriate strategies for adapting to the host culture and reducing stress	.571	.738	.817	3.51 (.888)
33. I used culture-specific information to improve my style and professional interaction with my hosts	.591	.731	.801	3.54 (.978)

32. I monitored my behavior and its impact on my learning, my growth, and especially on my hosts	.691	.716	.820	3.54 (.918)
27. I was able to contrast the host culture with my own	.604	.715	.841	3.79 (1.00)
28. I used strategies for learning the host language and about the host culture	.632	.715	.788	3.67 (.993)
34. I helped to resolve cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arose	.755	.694	.884	3.38 (1.09)
35. I employed appropriate strategies for adapting to my own culture after returning home	.554	.689	.798	3.49 (1.07)
42. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of diversity in the host culture	.619	.672	.842	3.69 (.816)
41. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of responses by host culture members to my own social identity	.572	.665	.801	3.67 (.919)
25. I demonstrated flexibility when interacting with persons from the host culture	.588	.655	.844	3.75 (.818)
39. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of how host culture members viewed me and why	.580	.650	.807	3.67 (.872)
26. I adjusted my behavior, dress, etc., as appropriate, to avoid offending my hosts	.381	.646	.713	3.50 (.964)
40. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of myself as a "culturally conditioned" person with personal habits and preferences	.628	.641	.816	3.72 (.876)
37. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of my negative reactions to these differences (e.g. fear, ridicule, disgust, superiority, etc.)	.661	.575	.819	3.43 (1.19)
36. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of differences and similarities across my own and the host language and culture	.473	.573	.737	3.93 (.939)
23. While in China, I demonstrated willingness to deal with the ethical implications of my choices (in terms of decisions, consequences, results, etc.)	.734	.565	.765	3.60 (.929)
22. While in China, I demonstrated willingness to interact in alternative ways, even when quite different from those to which I was accustomed and preferred	.632	.559	.753	3.42 (.931)
38. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of how varied situations in the host culture required modifying my interactions with others	.571	.545	.838	3.56 (.933)
53. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of how others perceived me as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	.676	.501	.823	3.49 (.822)
Component 2 Intercultural attitude and the awareness of the effect of inter-culture and its development	Cronbach's alpha= .930			
16. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to take on various roles appropriate to different situations (e.g., in the family, as a volunteer, etc.)	.628	.782	.821	3.35 (.952)
18. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to try to understand differences in the behaviors, values, attitudes, and styles of host members	.608	.744	.819	3.93 (.909)
12. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to interact with host culture members (I didn't avoid them or primarily seek out my compatriots)	.672	.719	.823	3.61 (.912)
19. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to adapt my behavior to communicate	.588	.705	.823	3.86 (.810)

appropriately in China (e.g., in non-verbal and other behavioral areas, as needed for different situations				
45. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of my personal values that affected my approach to ethical dilemmas and their resolution	.687	.689	.813	3.69 (.833)
47. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of how my values and ethics were reflected in specific situations	.648	.685	.801	3.56 (.886)
14. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to try to communicate in Chinese and behave in "appropriate" ways, as judged by my hosts	.699	.679	.814	3.88 (.903)
17. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to show interest in new cultural aspects (e.g., to understand the values, history, traditions, etc.)	.492	.678	.746	3.96 (.895)
51. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of factors that help or hinder my intercultural development and ways to overcome them	.576	.668	.751	3.58 (.765)
20. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to reflect on the impact and consequences of my decisions and choices on my hosts	.456	.628	.678	3.58 (.931)
21. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to deal with different ways of perceiving, expressing, interacting, and behaving	.524	.624	.734	3.72 (.876)
46. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of my hosts' reactions to me that reflected their cultural values	.666	.623	.829	3.54 (.934)
24. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to suspend judgment and appreciate the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally	.640	.619	.784	3.51 (.872)
15. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to deal with my emotions and frustrations with the host culture (in addition to the pleasures it offered)	.637	.617	.772	3.63 (.926)
50. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of the level of intercultural development of those I worked with (other program participants, hosts, co-workers, etc.)	.521	.610	.717	3.60 (.867)
43. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of dangers of generalizing individual behaviors as representative of the whole culture	.622	.600	.736	3.57 (.990)
48. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of varying cultural styles and language use, and their effect in social and working situations	.603	.578	.841	3.65 (.808)
13. While in China or Taiwan, I demonstrated willingness to learn from my hosts, their language, and their culture	.584	.574	.784	3.90 (.891)
49. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of my own level of intercultural development	.531	.544	.804	3.72 (.736)
44. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of my choices and their consequences (which made me either more, or less, acceptable to my hosts)	.602	.539	.792	3.49 (.934)
52. While in China or Taiwan, I realized the importance of how I perceived myself as communicator, facilitator, mediator, in an intercultural situation	.616	.538	.849	3.49 (.822)
Component 3 Intercultural knowledge	Cronbach's alpha= .849			

1. I could cite a definition of culture and describe its components and complexities	.663	.736	.817	3.11 (.815)
5. I knew some techniques to aid my learning of the host language and culture	.428	.700	.740	3.60 (.799)
3. I could contrast important aspects of the host language and culture with my own	.515	.697	.769	3.81 (.929)
9. I could cite various learning processes and strategies for learning about and adjusting to the host culture	.531	.687	.718	3.18 (.828)
2. I knew the essential norms and taboos of the host culture (e.g., greetings, dress, behaviors, etc.)	.553	.665	.802	3.67 (.822)
4. I recognized signs of culture stress and some strategies for overcoming it	.579	.659	.813	3.57 (.802)
10. I could describe interactional behaviors common among Chinese or Taiwanese in social and professional areas (e.g., family roles, team work, problem solving, etc.)	.621	.630	.779	3.51 (.872)
11. I could discuss and contrast various behavioral patterns in my own culture with those in China or Taiwan	.574	.556	.797	3.56 (.963)
8. I could describe a model of cross-cultural adjustment stages	.518	.546	.706	3.08 (.989)
6. I could contrast my own behaviors with those of my hosts in important areas (e.g., social interactions, basic routines, time orientation, etc.)	.540	.521	.789	3.86 (.756)

8.2 MANOVA

The result of the Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices illustrated that the covariance matrices for the dependent variables were not significantly different ($p > 0.05$), which means the robustness of the MANOVA test was guaranteed. The results of the MANOVA test showed no main effect on each of the four independent variables, namely, gender, length of stay in the Chinese-speaking community, previous SA experience, and self-rated Chinese proficiency level. In sum, whether a participant was male or female, the length they stayed in the Chinese-speaking community, whether or not they had previous SA experience, and their level of self-rated Chinese proficiency, had no significant influence on the three components of intercultural competence found in factor analysis. However, the result demonstrated that there was a significant interactive effect between Chinese proficiency and previous SA experience, $F(6, 94) = 2.357$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.131$; Power = 0.786. The value of the partial eta squared (η^2) was large and the observed power was strong. The interactive effect of Chinese proficiency and previous SA experience accounted for 13.1% of the total variability in intercultural competence.

Table 3 shows that the results of the between-subjects effects indicated that there was an interactive effect between Chinese proficiency and previous SA experience on Component 3, intercultural knowledge. The partial eta squared for the between-subjects test was large and the observed power was strong. It can be concluded that the interaction of learners' self-rated Chinese proficiency and their previous SA experience mediated their intercultural knowledge, the third component found in the factor analysis results.

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of variance: Between-subjects interactive effects

Between-subjects interactive effects (Component 3)	<i>F</i>	df	Signifi- cance	Partial eta squared	Observed power
Chinese Proficiency X Previous SA experience	6.272	2	.004	.207	.877

An examination of the mean scores in component 3, intercultural knowledge, revealed that the novice participants who had previous SA experience scored highest on their intercultural knowledge. Interestingly, the intermediate group with previous SA experience had the lowest intercultural knowledge mean score compared to the other groups, while the advanced group with previous SA experience scored higher than the intermediate group, but not as high as the novice group. On the other hand, within the no previous SA experience groups, their scores increased as their Chinese proficiency level developed into intermediate and advanced levels, though the scores of the novice and intermediate groups were still lower than any groups with previous SA experience.

Table 4. Between-subject interactive effects on component 3

Previous SA Experience	Chinese proficiency	M	SD
Yes	Novice	3.633	0.321
	Intermediate	3.424	0.445
	Advanced	3.583	0.416
No	Novice	3.389	0.810
	Intermediate	3.402	0.521
	Advanced	3.438	0.470

9 Conclusions and implications

To answer the first research question, “What kinds of intercultural competence do students who study Chinese as a second language abroad possess?”, through factor analysis, this study identified three components of intercultural competence, namely, intercultural skill and the awareness of the importance of intercultural competence while in the host culture, intercultural attitude and the awareness of the effect of inter-culture and its development, and intercultural knowledge. Fantini (2005) stated that intercultural awareness differs from intercultural knowledge in that it is all about the comparisons of oneself versus others in the world, which is developed through advancements in intercultural attitude and skill and is essential to the development of intercultural competence. Fantini’s statement explains the reason some of the awareness items (e.g., realizing the importance of how varied situations in the host culture required modifying one’s interactions with others) loaded together with skill items (e.g., using strategies to learn the host language and culture and adjusting behavior to avoid offending the local people) into component 1 and some of them loaded together with attitude items into component 2. The combinations of abilities loaded in the two components ultimately assist to define and clarify the relevance of one’s identity in relation to others. When the combinations of abilities couple with the other component, intercultural knowledge, all of them aid one another toward intercultural development. This finding implies that when cultivating students’ intercultural competence, none of the components should be overlooked as the development of one component complements and aids the development of the others. This implication suggests to language instructors and curriculum developers that integrating all components of intercultural competence in teaching is important.

To answer the second research question, “Do the SA students’ intercultural competence differ based on the following factors: (1) gender, (2) length of stay in the Chinese-speaking community, (3) previous SA experience, and (4) self-rated Chinese proficiency level?”, the results of the MANOVA test found a significant interactive effect between self-rated Chinese proficiency level and previous SA experience on Component 3, intercultural knowledge. It was observed that the participants who had previous SA experience scored higher on their intercultural knowledge compared to the ones at the same language levels who had no SA experience. In addition, a regression on the scores was observed. Within the groups who had previous SA experience, intermediate and advanced learners scored lower than beginners on their intercultural knowledge. This type of regression, in which more proficient learners rated themselves as less competent in intercultural knowledge, is not uncommon. A similar result was found in Schartner’s (2016) study of international students’ intercultural competence. After nine months in an English-speaking SA context, the study

found a decrease in the participants' intercultural competence. According to Fantini (2005), intercultural competence "evolves over a lengthy and continuing process, occasionally with moments of stagnation and even regression" (p. 2). Hence, Schartner argued that one needs to reject the widely accepted view that intercultural competence develops simply by staying abroad. Instead, the development of intercultural competence needs to be seen as an ongoing process with different contextual factors affecting it. The regressions found in Schartner's and the current studies should be interpreted as a snapshot of the SA experience, and not try to make a conclusion. This finding implies that when language instructors or language programs try to assess the efficiency of intercultural teaching by measuring the students' level of intercultural competence, long-term and multiple evaluations at different points in time are needed to yield a more accurate reflection of the students' progress.

10 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, this study used a convenient sample in which the number of participants and the locations of the participant samples were restricted to those to which the researchers had access. More diverse background variables in the Chinese SA context are needed in future research. Second, this study used only the quantitative research method. Future studies using different methods are needed to confirm the findings in this study. Third, there might be factors other than the ones investigated in this study which influence the development of intercultural competence. Future studies are needed to try to identify them. Finally, the findings of this study present the phenomenon of SA students' intercultural competence at a point in time and does not offer information on how it evolves. Longitudinal studies on the development of intercultural competence would be necessary to gain more insights on the evolution and reasons for regression of intercultural competence.

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