Learner Beliefs and Language Proficiency in SA Context: A Case study of Chinese Students Taking Pre-sessional Language Course in the UK

Li Xin, Zhang Jiayi
Shanghai International Studies University
School of English Studies,
China
e-mail:2626@shisu.edu.cn

Abstract:
This study seeks to explore the interrelation between learners’ beliefs and language proficiency in study abroad (SA) context. The participants of this study consisted of 30 Chinese students who were taking the pre-sessional language course at the University of Sheffield in the UK. Combining data from the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and test scores, the current study tries to answer three research questions: (1) Do learners’ beliefs change in the SA context? If so, in what ways? (2) Does learners’ language proficiency change in the SA context? If so, in what ways? (3) What is the relationship between learners’ English language proficiency and their beliefs about language learning?

By investigating learners’ beliefs change in SA context and how such change impacts on their language learning behavior and outcomes, it is hoped that students can have a more fruitful study-abroad sojourn.

Keywords: learner beliefs, language proficiency, language learning behavior and outcomes
Learner Beliefs and Language Proficiency in SA Context

1. Introduction

Learner’s beliefs and language learning in study abroad (SA) context has received some attention in the past 20 years (Kim, 2011; Kinginger, 2008, 2013; Norton, 2000, 2001, Tanaka, 2003, 2004, etc.). With education globalization and increasing student mobility, more up-to-date research is needed to help the growing number of students have a fruitful study-abroad sojourn.

The pre-sessional language course is an English language program of varying lengths (usually from 4 to 42 weeks) which aims to help students fulfill the language requirement of each school department and improve their ability in academic English. Many schools claim that students do not need to retake the IELTS test to satisfy the English language requirements as long as they pass the course and the final exam.

Copland and Garton (2011) claim that the pre-sessional course usually represents the international student’s initial experience of life in host country, indicating this is a critical stage that might have profound impact on their subsequent academic study. By focusing on this specific stage of these study abroad students, the present study seeks to investigate the relationship between learner beliefs and language learning behavior and outcomes. Specifically, it tries to answer three research questions:

1. Do learners’ beliefs change in the SA context? If so, in what ways?
2. Does learners’ language proficiency change in the SA context? If so, in what ways?
3. What is the relationship between learners’ English language proficiency and their beliefs about language learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Settings in SA Context

Many researchers have noted the importance of context in influencing the change of learners’ beliefs (Mori 1999, Wenden 1998, Yang and Kim 2011). Ellis (2008) uses the term ‘social setting’ (p. 286) to define the milieu in which learning takes place. He makes a rough distinction between the two social settings: natural settings and educational settings. Natural settings arise ‘in the course of the learners’ contact with other speakers of L2 in a variety of situations’ (p.288) such as the working place, home, social media, etc. Educational settings are those which occur at school and university language class. Ellis (2008) points out that language learning can occur in both of these two settings. Some learners might only learn language through one setting while others might have access to both settings during their language learning.

Kinginger (2009) terms these different milieus communicative setting and mentions that three major settings have been investigated in the SA literature: (1) educational institutions and classroom; (2) places of residence; (3) service encounters and other informal contact with expert speakers (p.114). Accommodation settings in SA
research are separately listed since home-stay experience has been viewed as the most significant aspect of study abroad programs (Brecht et al. 1997).

Both Ellis’ and Kinginger’s categorization have been widely accepted. In this study, the categorization of Ellis is adopted for two reasons. First, Ellis defines the educational settings as ‘where the target language is taught as subject’ (p.32), which lays more emphasis on language learning while Kinginger’s educational institutions and classroom refer consistently to the professional academic settings. Also, given all the participants in this study live in the student dormitory, the home-stay context does not apply in this research. That said, much of Kinginger’s findings are accepted in this research.

2.2 Educational Settings in SA Context

For many language learners, the educational settings in SA context are more challenging compared with the educational settings they used to experience in home country. Even in programs which are designed for international students, they also have problems with the unfamiliar social practices governed by local world views and new study genres.

Although much self-report research has recorded that many students seem to disparage the educational settings in SA context, Kinginger (2009) reminds that student opinion about educational settings are actually ‘diverse, dynamic and subject to change over time’ (p.121).

From the literature, it can be found that learners’ willingness of engagement in educational settings relates to both the micro-level feature of specific language class and the macro-level issues like program design, local values, etc.

2.3 Natural Settings in SA Context

It has been reported that one big difference between language learning at home country and abroad is that SA context has distinct advantages in both the quantity and quality of L2 input. This is viewed as one of the critical factors that influence L2 acquisition. Although the increasing opportunities in observing and using target language in informal settings have been recorded to help improve language proficiency (Collentine 2009, Norton 2009, Ellis 2008), it does not mean learning language abroad is a guarantee for language development.

Besides the research which tries to address the link between the extent the language learner exposed to the natural settings and the development in language proficiency, there are studies which focus on the correlation between some interrelated theoretical constructs (e.g. motivation, attitudes, self-confidence) and SA context (Isabelli-Garcia 2006, Magnan and Back 2007).

Based on the assumption that learners’ beliefs in terms of experiential learning, self-efficacy and confidence might be influenced and change after experiencing a certain amount of informal language communication in natural settings, this research hopes to offer a critical view of the relationship between the natural language settings and the improvement in language proficiency.
3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sites and Participants

This study was placed in the English Language Teaching Center (ELTC) of the University of Sheffield. Thirty Chinese students (22 females, 8 males) took part in the study by answering the questionnaire. The age range of these students was from 21 to 24 (mean age=22.2, SD=.86). The students were all enrolled in the pre-sessional language course offered by the ELTC but from three different language classes with different language tutors. These participants started taking the language programme in January, 2016.

Among them, 6 students were recruited through convenience sampling to participate in the following semi-structured interview. Basically, all these participants share a similar Chinese background. However, since they come from different parts of China, their language learning experience and learner beliefs are somewhat different. Detailed information of these interview participants is shown in Appendix One.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected from March to October 2016 through the method of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. All the students need to pass the USEPT test of ELTC in order to get an offer from the university. The test is designed to have the same type of questions and evaluation criteria as IELTS, making it comparable with the results of IELTS test. Thus the English language proficiency change of these participants was observed and analysed by comparing the IELTS score and the USEPT score. Table1 shows the timeline of data collection.

| Method                  | Data Collection          | Location  | Participants                  |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Questionnaire (1st time) | 1st-5th March, 2016      | Online    | ELTC Chinese Students         |
| IELTS Score Collection  | 1st-5th March, 2016      | Online    | ELTC Chinese Students         |
| Questionnaire           | 28th-31st, July, 2016    | Online    | ELTC Chinese Students         |
| USPET Test Score        | 15th, August, 2016       | Online    | ELTC Chinese Students         |
| Collection              | Semi-structured Interview| 23rd, August, 2016 | Student Union Café            |
|                         |                          |           | Summer                        |
|                         |                          |           | Joyce                         |
|                         |                          |           | Eva                           |
|                         |                          |           | Participant’s Flat            |
|                         |                          |           | Panni                         |
|                         |                          |           | Toney                         |
|                         |                          |           | Steven                        |
3.2.1 Questionnaire

Learners’ beliefs about language learning were tested by means of a questionnaire consisting of 27 statements designed by Tanaka and Ellis (2003). Participants were required to respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (see Appendix Two). This questionnaire measures beliefs about language learning on three dimensions: (a) beliefs about self (i.e. self-efficacy, confidence, aptitude, motivation), (b) beliefs about analytic learning, and (c) beliefs about experiential learning. The questionnaire was first used in Tanaka’s (1999) research in the form of 36 statements. Realizing that some statements loaded weakly on the three factors, Tanaka modified the questionnaire by removing some statements and adding some new ones. The factor analysis was done in Tanaka’s (2003) following research. Showing a loading of .40 or higher on each factor and the relatively low (22.39%) cumulative percentage of variance accounted for by the three factors, the factor analysis shows the construct validity of the questionnaire.

All the questionnaire surveys were conducted online with the help of internet. The participants were provided with the link of the questionnaire by using the WeChat communication software. All 30 participants completed the questionnaire. The results were automatically collected and edited by the Google Docs. In order to have a better understanding of the changes in students’ language learning beliefs, the questionnaire survey was conducted before the participants taking the pre-sessional language course (March, 2016) and after the pre-sessional language course (July, 2016).

3.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Six participants were interviewed in August 2016 after the questionnaire data were analysed. It was hoped that more in-depth data could be collected from the one-to-one semi-structured interview. In order to reach this goal, a semi-structured interview guide was designed (see Appendix Three) with open-ended questions and the interview was conducted in a conversational style. These questions are based on what the researcher found worth further investigating.

The interview was conducted after these participants received their language test report in August, 2016. The average time of each interview was one hour. By letting the participants decide the place for and the language of the interview, the researcher hoped they could feel relaxed. Except one participant (Summer) who let it done in her flat, all the other five interviews were conducted in the café. As to the interview language, all of them chose to use Chinese. An explanation for this might be that they did not want their English to be tested or become a barrier of communication.

4.1 Data Analysis

4.1 Reliability of the Questionnaire

The reliability of the learner belief questionnaire and each of its dimensions were measured before conducting the analysis. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient test was used to indicate the internal consistency of the data. According to DeVellis (1991), values ranging from .65 to .7 indicates an acceptable reliability. The reliability of the
overall α is .82 and .63 which shows a comparatively acceptable consistency and thus an acceptable reliability. However, it can be noticed that the reliability of the Self-efficacy and Confidence are fairly low in both the pre- and post-language course questionnaire (Time One = .41 and Time Two = 0.49). This can be explained by its smaller amount of items and the small scale of participants since these might lead to a comparative low Cronbach alpha result (Backhouse. 1982). Basically the statistic results indicate that the reliability of both questionnaires was fairly good in this particular sample.

Table 2: Reliability (N=30)

| Time Period | Name                          | Items | Reliability |
|-------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------------|
| Time One    | Learner Belief Questionnaire  | 27    | .82         |
|             | -Analytic Learning            | 12    | .84         |
|             | -Experiential Learning        | 11    | .71         |
|             | -Self-efficacy and Confidence | 4     | .41         |
| Time Two    | Learner Belief Questionnaire  | 27    | .63         |
|             | -Analytic Learning            | 12    | .58         |
|             | -Experiential Learning        | 11    | .60         |
|             | -Self-efficacy and Confidence | 4     | .49         |

4.2 Factor Analysis of Learner Beliefs Questionnaire

The results of a factor analysis of the students’ responses to the Learner Belief Questionnaire at Time One and Time Two are demonstrated in Table 3 and Table 4. In the research of Tanaka and Ellis (2003), they point out that the cumulative percentage of variance accounting for the three factors was relatively low (22.39% in their first test and 30.02% in their second test). According to the confirmatory factor analysis being done in this research, the cumulative percentage of variance accounting for the three factors are both higher than the results in their research (46.71% at Time One and 34.77% at Time Two). Table 3 and 4 also indicate which statement had a loading of .40 or higher on each factor in the two factor analyses.

Table 3: Factor Analysis of Learner Beliefs (Time One)

| Items | Questionnaire Items                                                                 | F1   | F2   | F3   |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Factor 1: Analytic Learning (Time One)                                              |      |      |      |
| 7     | In order to learn well, it is important for me to review what I have been taught in the English class. | .769 |      |      |
| 20    | I should be able to understand everything the teacher says in the English class.    | .626 |      |      |
| 11    | Memorisation is a good way for me to learn English.                                 | .619 |      |      |
| 13    | I can learn English well by following a textbook.                                   | .617 |      |      |
| 5     | In order to speak English well, it is important for me to learn grammar.             | .607 |      |      |
| 8     | I should be able to understand everything I read in English.                        | .443 |      |      |
### Factor 2: Experiential Learning (Time One)

| Item | Question | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 |
|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 10   | I can learn well by listing to radio or watching TV in English. | .84 | | |
| 12   | I can learn English well by living in an English-speaking country. | | .80 | |
| 3    | I can learn well if I try to study English outside class on my own. | | .74 | |
| 21   | It’s okay to guess if I do not know a word in English. | | .72 | |
| 24   | I can learn well if I try to think in English. | | .61 | |
| 19   | I can learn well by using English outside class. | | .59 | |
| 1    | I can learn well by speaking with others in English. | | .52 | |
| 15   | I can learn English well if I am studying just for pleasure. | | .48 | |
| 14   | I should not be forced to speak in the English class. | | .43 | |

### Factor 3: Self-efficacy and Confidence (Time One)

| Item | Question | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 |
|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 23   | It is possible for me to learn to speak English very well. | | .60 | |
| 16   | I am satisfied with my progress in English so far. | | .61 | |
| 6    | It doesn’t matter if I make mistakes when speaking with others in English. | | .59 | |

| Eigenvalue | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 |
|------------|----------|----------|----------|
| 3.33       | 6.5      | 2.7      |
| 7          |          |          |

| Percentage of Variance | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 |
|------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| 12.34                  | 24.32    | 10.04    |
| 36.66                  |          |          |

| Cumulative Percentage | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| 46.71                 |          |          |          |

### Table 4: Factor Analysis of Learner Beliefs (Time Two)

| Items | Questionnaire Items | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 |
|-------|---------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| 4     | I can learn English well by writing down everything in my notebook. | 0.832    | | |
| 11    | Memorisation is a good way for me to learn English. | 0.657    | | |
| 27    | I would like my English teacher to correct all my mistakes. | 0.578    | | |
| 13    | I can learn English well by following a textbook. | 0.553    | | |
| 8     | I should be able to understand everything I read in English. | 0.526    | | |
| 7     | In order to learn well, it is important for me to review what I have been taught in the English class. | 0.439    | | |
Factor 2: Experiential Learning (Time Two)

|   | Belief                                                                 | Score |
|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 9 | In order to learn well, it is important for me to try to think about my progress in English. | 0.623 |
| 10 | I can learn well by listing to radio or watching TV in English.         | 0.608 |
| 3  | I can learn well if I try to study English outside class on my own.    | 0.562 |
| 12 | I can learn English well by living in an English-speaking country.     | 0.540 |
| 15 | I can learn English well if I am studying just for pleasure.           | 0.533 |
| 19 | I can learn well by using English outside class.                       | 0.475 |
| 1  | I can learn well by speaking with others in English.                   | 0.440 |

Factor 3: Self-efficacy and Confidence (Time Two)

|   | Belief                                                                 | Score |
|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 26 | It is possible for me not to get nervous when speaking English.        | 0.623 |
| 23 | It is possible for me to learn to speak English very well.             | 0.594 |
| 16 | I am satisfied with my progress in English so far.                     | 0.577 |
| 6  | It doesn’t matter if I make mistakes when speaking with others in English. | 0.527 |

Eigenvalue 3.51 3.10 2.80
Percentage of Variance 13.02 11.38 10.37
Cumulative Percentage 13.02 24.40 34.77

4.3 Language learner beliefs across pre- and post-study abroad

Table 5 presents means, ranges and standard deviations of the scores for the two questionnaires. The table shows that the means of the learner belief questionnaire were 93.73 at Time One and 96.67 at Time Two. The distribution of the scores for each questionnaire was reflected by the standard deviations. Both SDs were small, which indicates there was not much difference among the participants’ language learning beliefs. The variation shows that there were less inner group differences in the second survey (SD= 6.23) than the first one (SD=10.16).

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for the Two Questionnaire (N=30)
It can be found that the mean score of analytic learning shows a slight decrease from 40.43 at Time One to 39.57 at Time Two, which means basically there is more change as to the learner’s beliefs concerning analytic learning. While the mean score of experiential learning shows an increase (from 39.77 at Time One to 42.10 at Time Two), the mean score of self-efficacy and confidence shows the greatest change from 13.53 at Time One to 14.97 at Time two, which reported a 1.44 gains (10.64%) after they finished the pre-sessional language course. Although the overall mean score shows the tendency of an increasing mean score, the separate dimensions of language learning beliefs actually have their different positive or negative changes. Following the descriptive analysis, the non-parametric t-test was performed to examine the possible changes in participants’ beliefs about language learning at three dimensional levels by testing the \( p \) value of each statement. Table 6 shows the results that produced the greatest change.

| Questionnaire Items | M    | SD   | Sig. (Related Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test) |
|---------------------|------|------|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Analytical Learning** |      |      |                                               |
| 13. I can learn English well by following a textbook. | 3.13 | .82  | .02                                           |
| 5. In order to speak English well, it is important for me to learn grammar. | 3.87 | .77  | .02                                           |
| 4. I can learn English well by writing down everything in my notebook. | 3.33 | .71  | .04                                           |
| 8. I should be able to understand everything I read in English. | 3.27 | .86  | .05                                           |
| **Experiential Learning** |      |      |                                               |
| 19. I can learn well by using English outside the class | 3.67 | .71  | .00                                           |
| 15. I can learn English well if I am studying just for pleasure. | 2.80 | 1.016| .00                                           |
| 24. I can learn well if I try to think in English. | 3.9  | .78  | .03                                           |
| 1. I can learn well by speaking with others in English. | 3.87 | .86  | .05                                           |
| **Self-efficacy and Confidence** |      |      |                                               |
| 6. It doesn’t matter if I make mistakes when speaking with others in English. | 2.80 | .90  | .00                                           |
| 16. I am satisfied with my progress in English so far. | 2.47 | .93  | .02                                           |

Table 6: Belief changes at different dimensional levels
The beliefs concerning self-efficacy and confidence shows the greatest changes (item 6 and 16). This can be explained that participants show an increasing confidence in speaking English. They become satisfied with their progress and show less worry in making mistakes.

A significant change was also identified in another item from another category: Item 19 from Experiential Learning (p<0.00). The participants’ agreement in this item increased significantly from the pre-course (M=3.67, SD=.71) to the post-course (M=4.13, SD=.34). They tended to agree more that language proficiency can be improved outside of the class. Another change observed in this category is the item 15 (M=2.80, SD=1.06 at Time One and M=3.40, SD=.93 at Time Two), which seems that some students felt they could make greater progress if they learned language for pleasure.

On the dimension of analytical learning, some statistically significant decreases are observed in item 13 (p=0.02) and 5 (p=0.02). In terms of item 13, the mean increased from 3.13 to 2.50. It indicates a tendency that participants relied less on using a specific textbook to learn English. Also item 5 shows significant decrease with an p=0.02(M=3.87, SD=.77 at Time One and M=3.47, SD=.77 at Time Two). Thus, participants view grammar as a less important aspect compared with what they believed at the beginning of the pre-sessional course.

4.4 Descriptive Statistics of the Test Scores

Table 7 shows the test results prior to and after the pre-sessional language course. A paired-samples t-test was conducted in order to examine if there was a change in the participants’ score. The difference between Time One and Time Two was statistically significant, which reflected an improvement of 25.9%. The larger gain in proficiency was seen in reading section (27.9%) and the smallest in listening (23.6%). Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the test scores at each skill level. The statistically significant increase can be found in all language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) and the total test scores.

|        | Time One | Time Two | M Diff. | %    | t    | df   | p      |
|--------|----------|----------|---------|------|------|------|--------|
| Listening | 5.77    | .68     | 7.13    | .75  | 1.36 | 236  | -7.84  | .000  |
| Reading  | 5.80    | .60     | 7.42    | .81  | 1.62 | 279  | -10.09 | .000  |
| Writing  | 5.00    | .53     | 6.35    | .46  | 1.35 | 270  | -10.09 | .000  |
| Speaking | 5.10    | .75     | 6.45    | .50  | 1.35 | 265  | -9.37  | .000  |
| Total   | 5.48    | .55     | 6.90    | .53  | 1.42 | 259  | -10.60 | .000  |

4.5 Relationship between belief and language proficiency

The relationship between the participants’ beliefs about language learning at the dimensional levels (analytical learning, experiential learning, self-efficacy and confidence) and their language learning achievement (test score) were explored by
Spearman’s correlation coefficients. The correlations prior to and subsequent to the pre-sessional language course are shown in Tables 8 and 9, respectively.

**Table 8: Relationship between Beliefs and Proficiency Before Pre-sessional Language Program**

|                      | Listening | Reading | Writing | Speaking | Total |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------|----------|-------|
| Analytic Learning    | .23**     | .19*    | .01     | .24      | .24** |
| Experiential Learning| .15*      | .13     | .09     | .20*     | .20   |
| Self-efficacy and Confidence | .06 | .05 | .04 | .15 | .03 |

**p<.01, *p<.05**

At Time One (Table 8), it can be found that analytic learning shows its weak relation (yet statistically significant) with the listening and reading score of the student’s language proficiency. Also, it can be found that beliefs about experiential learning related weakly to the Test score, especially the listening and speaking score. However, this table shows no relationship between learners’ self-efficacy and confidence and their test score.

In contrast, a moderate and statistically significant association exists between learner’s beliefs about experiential learning and the test score ($r=.44$, $p=0.04$, $p<0.05$), especially their listening score ($r=.47$, $p=0.009$, $p<0.01$) and writing score ($r=.43$, $p=0.02$, $p<0.05$). The weak association between analytic learning and test score can also be found in Table 10 ($r=.23$, $p=0.03$, $p<0.05$). The relationship between analytic learning and listening score was negative ($r=-.13$, $p=.02$, $p<.05$), which means that those who focus more on analytic learning had a lower score in the listening section. None of the correlations shows statistical significance in both Table 8 and 9.

In order to examine the relationship between changes in the learners’ beliefs and gains or losses in proficiency, the Spearman’s correlation coefficients test was conducted. The first variable is the change of learners’ beliefs, which is collected by subtracting the mean belief score of Time One from the score of Time Two. Another variable, the change of test scores is collected by subtracting the mean test score of Time One from the score of Time Two. The results of the subsequent correlational analyses are shown in Table 10.
Table 10: Relationship between Changes in Beliefs and Gains/Losses in Proficiency

|                          | Listening | Reading | Writing | Speaking | Total |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|---------|----------|-------|
| **Analytic Learning**    | -.27*     | -.42*   | .62**   | .39      | .49** |
| **Experiential Learning**| .05       | .38*    | .42*    | .33      | .30   |
| **Self-efficacy and Confidence** | -.14      | .02     | -.02    | .59      | -.05  |

**p<.01, *p<.05

Different from the previous research of Tanaka and Ellis (2003) which claims that their result about correlations were very weak and statistically non-significant, this current research observes a moderate correlation between the test scores and the beliefs about analytic learning. A strong association occurs as to the analytic learning and writing score (r=.62, p=.00, p<.01). However, the results record a negative correlation between the analytic learning and their listening (r= -.27, p=.04, p<.05) or reading (r= -.42, p=.02, p<.05) score. This table also observes a moderate relationship between the mean score in experiential learning and the test scores in terms of the reading (r=.38, p=.04, p<.05) and writing (r=.42, p=.02, p<.05). However, in the dimension concerning self-efficacy and confidence, the correlations were very low and statistically non-significant.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Learning in ELTC: Feeling the Difference

Although many researchers (Ellis 2008, Costa 2011, Yang and Kim 2011) claim that the biggest difference in SA context might be the change of the ‘big environment’, formal instruction is also found in current research to have its strong influence in changing the learners’ beliefs. These influences mainly occurred in three aspects: the teaching method, the learning content and the classroom environment.

5.1.1 The Teaching Method

Many participants expressed their high expectations for the teacher in ELTC at the beginning of the language programme. Eva thought ‘native speaker is better than Chinese English teachers’. Natalie said the language teaching method in China was not suitable for her. Thus she wanted to ‘try a new teaching method’. However, like what has been acknowledged by previous researchers (Kinginger 2013, Serrano et al. 2011), study abroad students may have problems in dealing with new teaching genres and teachers.

My tutor uses authentic listening materials to help us practice listening, which I think should be a good way to improve the listening ability. However, I am still struggling for understanding new words and I find sometimes it is hard to follow the listening material, especially when it is related to some current news. For example, the tutor showed us a video clip about the refugee issue in U.K. To be honest, I know little about this and I am not even familiar with the political situation in U.K. So for me, this material is still very ‘far from my life’.

---Summer
Many participants found that the new language teaching methods of their native tutors are quite challenging. In order to pass the exam, they choose to change their learning strategies. ‘Writing down everything in the notebook’ turns out to be a favorite method. Eva reported that she has to ‘write down as many key words and sentences as possible’ to help her review the lessons and prepare for the exam. The quantitative data shows the significance of this item.

Besides the teaching method, the current research records the participants’ change of attitudes towards the language teaching in home country. Some participants reported that they realized the strength of the English education at home country, especially in the field of grammar. Steven claimed that the Chinese English teacher is better in teaching grammar and reading. He found that sometimes his tutor failed to give ‘clear and understandable answers’. He also explained that this might contribute to his tutor’s identity as a native speaker, which made his tutor take many answers for granted.’ Many students could have the same opinion of Steven, as can be told from the high mean score of item 17 (I would like my English teacher to explain important things in my first language so I can understand everything) in the second questionnaire. Panni felt the biggest difference about learning in ELTC is that she no longer has to ‘struggle with grammar’ since the tutor thought fluency is more important. This explains why participants in the questionnaire show a decrease in viewing grammar as an important factor in language learning.

5.1.2 The Learning Content

Statistical data indicate the reading and writing score of these participants show the greatest change. Combined with the individual interviews, the researcher found that the learning focus of these language courses somewhat contributed to this result.

Since all the English courses offered in the pre-sessional language program are designed to help students cope with daily academic study, students were requested to hand in two academic essays besides taking the final test. It was in this situation that many students felt their writing skills greatly improved.

I found the only way to improve my writing skills is to write as much as possible. I was quite confused in doing my first essay assignment because I have never written any academic essay before. But in the second one, I felt that I was writing more fluently and was able to present my idea logically.

---Summer

Besides the form of assignment, the teaching focus of this program is clearly on cultivating the reading ability of academic content. Many participants reported the large number of academic articles they have to read in their course:

We have to read a lot of academic articles after class to prepare for class discussion. These articles are hard to understand……but you have to know the main point and the structure…… or you cannot say anything (in the class
discussion). We usually read a lot of academic articles in our reading class, writing class and even in speaking class. ---Toney

We don’t have a textbook. Usually we just use the handouts given by the tutor. And the majority of the handouts are academic essays. Although they are usually not interesting at all, they are what we have to face in our future academic study. ---Joyce

Being immersed in the huge amount of academic articles, the reading score of the participants showed great improvement (for the mean score of 5.80 at Time One and at 7.42 Time Two). Actually, the learning content not only influences students’ test scores but also changes their language learning beliefs. They no longer view ‘understanding everything they read’ as an essential aim they should achieve in English learning.

5.1.3 The Classroom Environment

Taking the language course abroad offers students an opportunity to study with other international students. It has been found in this study that this type of classroom environment can also lead to the change of participants’ language learning beliefs.

One of the most significant changes is that they started to realize English can be improved not only by speaking with the native speaker but also using it as a lingua franca to communicate with peers. Eva said that speaking English with her Arabic classmates enabled her to ‘improve her listening skill’ and ‘speak more fluently’. Toney said he found it was easier to practice English with his Austrian classmate and make progress:

‘Talking with my Austrian classmate is less stressful…….compared with (talking to) the locals. Because he speaks slower than the locals and I am not afraid of letting him repeat if I cannot understand him.’

However, when asked whether they think speaking English with fellow Chinese students can improve their language proficiency, they all said it was ‘awkward’ and ‘useless’. ‘We know the same mother tongue. Even when I use some incorrect collocations and expressions, my Chinese friends still understand me. But if I talk to international students, they don’t.’ Summer explained. Their different attitudes towards speaking English with other international students and with Chinese students explained why the score of item 1 showed its significance in the statistical result ($p<0.01$).

Meanwhile, learning with other international students enabled the participants to notice the different English education traditions in different countries. Eva reported that she noticed her Arabic classmates can speak English fluently even if they make more grammar mistakes than the Chinese students. This made her think grammar less important as she believed before since her tutor ‘thought Arabic students speak better English than Chinese students’.
Although many students attribute their improved language proficiency to the study abroad environment instead of the language agency (Kinginger, 2009), they benefit from the language program to different degrees.

5.2 Living in Sheffield: Lifting the Veil

5.2.1 ‘This is English’—using English in daily life

According to Yang and Kim (2011), for many L2 students, the time of using English in daily life is quite limited. In current research, some participants even reported that they had never used English in informal communication before studying abroad, so that many of them felt shocked and confused when they first arrived in the UK. Eva complained that the English she learned at home provided no help in real life situation:

‘The first time I was asked ‘How are you’, I naturally responded ‘Fine, thank you. And you’. Then he said ‘Good’. Then I felt awkward because the dialogue I learned from my English book never taught me how to reply to the answer of ‘Good’.’

Toney says that he felt he could learn more from his British friends than the textbook:

‘My friends said I was bookish. Now I can use some slangs they taught me. The textbook will never tell you how to use cheers to express thanks.’

These extracts prove the questionnaire result of item 19: I can learn well by using English outside class, which shows its significant increase from the mean score of 3.67 at Time one to 4.13 at Time two (p< 0.01). The subjects tended to put more investment in using English outside the classroom when they felt their progress. However, another interesting phenomenon also emerged. Although they thought their oral English has significantly improved, the test result shows that the increase of the speaking score only ranks third compared with other language skills.

Another change recorded in current research is the students’ opinion on using English in some special daily communication setting like hospitals and banks. Summer talked about her experience of going to the hospital:

‘I am afraid of going to the hospital because I think I cannot understand these medical terms. I had a car accident after I came here. Luckily, I just had some cuts and bruise. But I needed to go to the hospital to check if I had the concussion. I was pretty worried when I walked into the consulting room. The doctor asked if I had some symptoms like nausea, vomiting, and other. He used body language to explain when I didn’t understand. So now I feel going to the hospital is not that difficult.’

Joyce described her experience of using the bank self-service machine:

‘I was nervous because it was the first time I went to the bank without my friend’s company. Actually I felt at a loss when facing the self-service machine. Noticing my confusion and hesitation, the staff member came up and asked if I needed any help. I learned how to use the machine to deposit
with her help. It was not as difficult as I thought. Actually you can always ask for help when dealing with such problems.’

Consequently, the more successful experience they had in informal interaction, the more confidence they developed in using English in informal encounters. This contributed to the significant improvement in the self-efficacy and confidence dimension.

5.2.2 They are British--- communicating with the locals in daily life

In the interview, the researcher found that students tended to imagine the British people as ‘gentle’, ‘indifferent’ and ‘old-school’. Although these imagined pictures might have an impact at the initial stage, it was the feedback they had in the communication that led to the change of their language learning attitudes and beliefs.

For instance, Summer talked about her unpleasant experience with a local student she met at the school café. During the small talk about the marriage culture, she wanted to explain why those unmarried Chinese women are viewed as unsuccessful in Chinese society. However, her local friend failed to understand her explanation and finish the conversation by concluding that ‘Chinese people are strange’. This made Summer very depressed and she contributed this failure to her poor oral proficiency and limited vocabulary: ‘I refuse to talk to local people about the topic related to my culture if I think I cannot explain it clearly’, she said.

There are also positive and pleasant interactions between the participants and the locals. Panni described cheerfully her three-day home stay experience at a local British family:

The family live in York. They spent a whole day driving us to different places and introducing the history of this city. When I introduced the Chinese culture to them, they seemed quite interested. I think it was an excellent experience and I learned more about the British culture.

Panni noted as a language learner and newcomer, ‘it is unavoidable to make some mistakes which might lead to frustration’. Her beliefs turned out to be a positive factor in helping her make daily communication. Both the experiences of Summer and Panni prove the claims of Woods (2003) that beliefs are situated in social contexts and formed through specific instances of social interaction.

5.2.3 ‘This is U.K.’--- living experience in the UK.

During the study, the researcher found that many students used to equate ‘studying abroad’ to ‘having native English speakers surrounded’. This is reflected by the comparatively high mean score of item 12 ‘I can learn English well by living in an English-speaking country’ in the Time one questionnaire. However, they noted that their learning lives in Sheffield are not what they expected. Besides talking with their language tutor and some shop assistants, most of the time they can only stay with other Chinese students:
This is not I want. Everywhere there are many Chinese. I am very disappointed about that. I know I need to try to speak English here, but it is really hard to find a native speaker you can hang out with. I came here all the way from China to be in a different learning environment. However, it is not what I imagined. -- Toney

Participants in this study imagined the UK as a normative homogeneous society where they could learn English easily when immersed in the social environment. However, they found gap existed between the imagination of ‘being viewed as an Asian minority’ and the reality of ‘becoming a part of the big Chinese community’ after arriving. The feeling of depression and frustration arose (cf. Norton, 2001). They no longer believe that they can ‘learn English well by living in an English-speaking country’ (questionnaire item 12) since they realize studying abroad is not a guarantee to contact native speakers easily.

5.3 The Mutual Influence between the Educational Setting and Natural Settings

It has been found that students’ beliefs concerning classroom language learning might change when they inferred what they have experienced in the natural settings. For instance, as has been observed previously (Kinginger 2009), the current research also recorded that negative appraisals of the authenticity and usefulness of the formal instruction might occur when students noticed the variety of living language outside the formal educational settings. With feelings of disappointment and doubt, these students stopped viewing the classroom language learning as the only method, hence the change of beliefs. Some students relied less on classroom learning and started to develop their own learning methods (e.g. using some language learning Apps or involved in some social activities like language learning mutual-help group). Their learning autonomy thus developed during this process.

Another significant change that natural settings brought to the educational setting is the attitude towards grammar. Noticing accuracy is not the primary concern in successful daily communication, their language learning priority in class changed accordingly. Instead of being afraid of making mistakes, they shifted focus to whether they expressed their ideas clearly and effectively. They started to pay more attention to other aspects like the use of appropriate expressions and the logical relationship between sentences, thus their writing score improved.

The formal instructions these participants received during the language program also influence the language use in natural settings, which consequently led to the change of learner beliefs and language proficiency. For instance, the enjoyable home-stay experience of Panni, as she described, ‘is attributable to the improvement in listening and speaking skills’. Besides informal interactions with other English speakers, she mentioned that the seminar she had in ELTC offered her opportunities for practicing oral English. The more successful they are in daily communication, the more motivated they become in classroom learning. These two settings build a positive mutual influence which enables students to improve their language proficiency.
6. Conclusion and Implications

This study aims to explore the interrelation between learners’ beliefs and language proficiency in study abroad (SA) context. The first research question concerns whether their beliefs have changed after a period of learning in the UK and how. In current study, it has been recorded that there are statistically significant changes in learners’ beliefs during the pre-sessional program. The strongest effect is evident in beliefs relating to self-efficacy and confidence. From the quantitative and qualitative data, it is found that participants showed increasing attention to adjusting their learning methods and strategies with a view to improving language proficiency. This corroborates the statements of Jackson (2006) and Pellegrino (2005) that study abroad learners are willing to accept a degree of personal responsibility for achieving language learning goals. Thus, it can be stated that studying language abroad has led to an increase in learners’ self-autonomy.

The second research question concerns whether learners’ language proficiency changes in the SA context and how. As measured by the test scores, there are statistically significant gains in proficiency during the pre-sessional language program. However, the researcher found that the gains of the scores are related to the nature of the program, which is to help students reach the language requirement set by each university department.

As to the last research question (What is the relationship between learners’ English language proficiency and their beliefs about language learning?), it seems that no statistically significant relationship exists between the overall changes in beliefs and gains or losses in proficiency. Only moderate correlation between beliefs about analytic learning and the test score is reported in current research. The correlation between increasing confidence and test scores does not occur in this research.

As is evident from this study, the change of learners’ beliefs is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. For time restriction, this research only lasted 4 months and ended with the language course. It is believed that more insights can be gained if the research records the language learning beliefs after the participants start their academic life. Thus, a longitudinal research is urgently needed to fully record and investigate the change process.

References

Barcelos, A.M.F. (2003). Researching beliefs about SLA: A critical review. In: Kalaja, P., Barcelos, A.M.F. (Eds.), Beliefs about SLA: New Research Approaches. Kluwer Academic Publishers (pp. 7-33), London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Benson, P., & Lor, W. (1999). Conceptions of language and language learning. System, 27, 459–72.

Brecht, R. D., Frank, V., Keesling, J. W., O’Mara, F. & Walton, A. R. (1997). A guide for evaluating foreign language immersion training. Washington, D.C.: Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Committee.
Collentine, J. (2009). Study abroad research: findings, implications and future directions. In C. Doughty & M. Long (Eds.). *The Handbook of Language Teaching* (pp. 218–233). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Copland, F., & Garton S. (2011). I felt that I do live in the UK now: international student’s self-reports of their English language speaking experiences on a pre-sessional programme. *Language and Education*, 25(3), 241-255.

DeVellis, R. F. (1991). *Scale Development Theory and Application*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Isabelli-García, C. L. (2006). Study abroad social networks, motivation, and attitudes: Implications for SLA. In M. A. DuFon, & E. Churchill (Eds.), *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts* (pp.231-58). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Kinginger, C. (2004). Alice doesn’t live here anymore: Foreign language learning as identity (re)constructions. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.). *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 219–242). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Kinginger, C. & Farrell-Whitworth, K. (2005). *Gender and emotional investment in language learning during study abroad*. CALPER Working Papers, Series No. 2. The Pennsylvania State University, Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research.

Kinginger, C. (2008). Language learning in study abroad: case studies of Americans in France. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92, 1-124.

Kinginger, C. (2009). Culture and identity in study abroad contexts: after Australia, French without France. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12(5), 597-599.

Kinginger, C. (2013). Identity and language learning in study abroad. *Foreign Language Annuals*, 46(3), 339-358.

Mori, Y. (1999). Epistemological Beliefs and Language Learning Beliefs: What Do Language Learners Believe About Their Learning. *Language Learning*, 49(3), 377–415.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson Education Limited.

Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities, and the language classroom. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 159-171). London: Pearson Education Limited.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2001). Changing perspectives on good language learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(2), 307-19.

Norton, B. (2010). Language and identity. In N. Hornberger & S. McKay (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language education* (pp.349-369). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Serrano, R., Llanes, A., & Tragant, E. (2011). Analyzing the effect of context of second language learning: Domestic intensive and semi-intensive courses vs. study abroad in Europe. *System*, 39, 133-143.
Tanaka, K. (1999). The development of an instrument to investigate learners’ beliefs about language learning. Unpublished seminar paper, Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics, University of Auckland.

Tanaka, K., & Ellis, R. (2003). Study-abroad, language proficiency, and learner beliefs about language learning. *JALT Journal*, 25(1), 63-85.

Tanaka, K. (2004). Changes in Japanese students’ beliefs about language learning and English language proficiency in a study-abroad context (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Yang, S. K., & Kim, Y. T. (2011). Sociocultural analysis of second language learner beliefs: A qualitative case study of two study-abroad ESL learners. *System*, 39, 325-34.

About the Authors:

**Li Xin, Zhang Jiayi**

*Shanghai International Studies University*

*School of English Studies,*

550 West Dalian Road,

*Shanghai, China, 200083*

*Phone:* (86)135-1213-9261

*e-mail:* 2626@shisu.edu.cn