Chapter 3
Learning Chinese: Connections and Comparisons in Study Abroad

Kaishan Kong
University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, USA

ABSTRACT

Both ACTFL standards and the world-readiness standards for learning languages include five aspects in foreign language education, among which are connections and comparisons. While many instructors consider these two aspects as means of effective instruction, in this chapter, connections and comparisons are studied as learning strategies that four American students adopted to apply in their study abroad contexts in China. Despite the different focus of their study abroad programs, this chapter discusses a variety of examples where the participants made connections and comparisons to enhance their language and culture learning. Findings reveal that connections and comparisons were not only fostering language learning but also developing cultural knowledge. Results provide implications to foreign language educators related to teaching and preparing students for study abroad experience.

INTRODUCTION

With the influential role of China as an economic power and the growing popularity of Chinese learning, the number of individuals studying Chinese has skyrocketed around the globe in recent years. Hanban/Confucius Institute, a public institute affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, reported that over 40 million foreigners around the world were learning Chinese in 2010, and the number had

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increased by 10 million since 2006 (China Daily, 2010). Statistics from the Institute of International Education (2016) showed that China was the fifth leading destination for students from the US to study abroad in 2014-2015; 12,790 American students studied abroad in China, taking up 4.1% of the total number of American students choosing to study in foreign colleges.

While there exist many valuable studies on Chinese language teaching and learning in international contexts, scholars call for more research to study students’ perceptions about how their experiences relate to their language and culture learning during study abroad. What distinguishes this study from other studies is placing students’ voices at the center of this research. Using students’ own narratives to examine how learning occurs. What does China, as a study abroad context, have to offer for learning? How do students take advantage of the learning opportunities and resources? These are intriguing questions and this work seeks answers through four American students’ narratives in two different study abroad programs in China. The purpose of this chapter is to discover participants’ strategies to enhance language and culture learning, through an array of examples gathered in their everyday life during study abroad in China.

BACKGROUND

As this chapter explores the application of connections and comparisons to develop knowledge in study abroad contexts, the literature review encompasses the following aspects: learning in context; study abroad; and connections and comparisons in the realm of language and culture learning.

Learning Contexts

The importance of contexts in language learning has been explored for decades. In 1962, Hymes discussed eight factors that would influence speech events, including: (1) setting; (2) participants; (3) end or purpose; (4) act sequence; (5) key verbal and nonverbal manners; (6) instrumentalities; (7) norms of interaction and interpretation; and (8) genre. Batstone (2002), however, argued that these were external contexts, which referred to the features of the context of the speech event. Batstone (2002) further stressed that context should include one more dimension i.e., (9) the dynamic context. The dynamic context was more related to the language learner’s inner orientation or purpose for learning. In other words, Batstone (2002) suggested that both external environment and learners’ internal purpose for learning should be considered to explain his or her language acquisition.
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