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L2 Chinese learners' second language socialization with Chinese peers and strangers conducting L2 interviews during long-term study abroad in China

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Abstract

This study explores the Second Language Socialization (SLS) experiences of international students in a study abroad (SA) Chinese language program in China, focusing on a structured L2 interview task with two groups of local interlocutors: Chinese peers and local strangers. Drawing from task recordings, surveys, written reflections, and follow-up interviews, this research unveils two contrasting interacting dynamics: peer interviews were characterized by supportive but overly accommodating responses, while stranger interactions were less sympathetic, more critical, and accompanied by tensions stemming from power dynamics, cultural stereotypes, or misunderstandings. Through a SLS lens, the study reveals how intersecting identities and positionalities of study SA participants, such as being female and racially unmarked, impacted unequal access to meaningful language and interactions with strangers, while visibly foreign students sometimes triggered nationalistic or defensive reactions. In addition, SA participants' language proficiency, limited inquiry strategies, and narrow perceptions of the interview task also constrained their ability to engage more effectively with authentic SLS opportunities. The study underscores the need for pedagogical intervention to optimize L2 learning SA participants' membership-building and identity negotiation in the target community. Practical

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implications emphasize structured pre- and post-task guidance, peer facilitation training, critical task reflection, enhanced intercultural preparation on sensitive interview topics, and context-specific identity awareness to better prepare students for authentic intercultural communication during study abroad programs.

Abstract in Mandarin

本研究探讨在华留学中文项目中国际学生参与二语社会化的经历，重点关注与两组本地对话者（中国同龄人和本地陌生人）进行的二语访谈任务。通过对任务录音、调查问卷、书面反思以及后续访谈的分析，研究揭示了两种截然不同的互动动态：与同龄人进行的访谈体现出同龄人对学习者支持但过度迁就的回应特点，而陌生人在访谈互动中则表现出同情心较低、更具批判性，并伴随着因权力动态、文化刻板印象或误解而引发的紧张关系。通过二语社会化视角，本研究揭示了学习者的多重身份与位置性（如女性身份或亚裔种族等）如何导致在与陌生人互动时获得有意义语言和交流机会的不平等，而非亚裔外貌特征明显的外国学生则有时会引发陌生人民族主义或防御性反应。此外，学习者的语言水平、有限的提问策略，以及对访谈任务的理解不足，进一步限制了他们更有效地把握真实的二语社会化机会的能力。该研究强调需通过教学干预，优化学习者在目标社区中建立归属感与进行身份协商的能力。实践意义包括：提供结构化的任务前后指导、同伴引导培训、批判性任务反思、对敏感采访话题的跨文化准备、以及针对具体语境的身份意识培养，从而更好地帮助学生为在海外学习期间进行真实的跨文化交流做好准备。

Keywords

Chinese as a second language; discourse analysis; intersecting identity and positionality; L2 interview tasks; second language socialization; study abroad

1. Introduction

Access to ample opportunities for immersion in L2 learning and use during study abroad (SA) is often taken for granted. Despite such expectations, studies (Byram & Feng, 2006; Kinginger, 2008; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013; Surtees, 2018; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015) have revealed that L2 adult learners generally have minimal access to meaningful spoken interactions with L2 speakers outside of their classes, hence limiting their access to participation in the local communities. Even when paired with an interlocutor, opportunities to practice L2 could still be minimal if an unsympathetic interlocutor dominates the conversation or simply switches to another language (Duff, 2019). SA participants' reported lack of access to opportunities for L2 practices could be attributed to multiple intersecting factors. The types of relationship SA students

have with local interlocutors can impact the degree of exposure to and immersion in the target language and culture (Spenader, 2008). Host nationals' attitude and beliefs towards L2 learners of diverse backgrounds (Tang & Zhang, 2023), intersecting identities, and positionalities such as race, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status (e.g., Diao, 2021; Diao & Wang, 2021; Du, 2019; Goldoni, 2017; Kang & Shively, 2024; Lee et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2026) also make an impact. Hence, designing L2 instruction in SA language programs requires careful consideration of the nature of the interactional experience and characteristics of learners and their local interlocutors.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines these factors in the context of SA in China following the lifting of COVID-19 travel restrictions in 2023. This period marked the return of international students to in-person study after an extended period of remote learning. Recognizing international students' post-COVID desire to resume in-person interactions, this study explores the potential of Chinese language learning tasks in socializing L2 Chinese learners during SA in China. Second Language Socialization (SLS) between a cohort of full-time international students at an English-medium Sino-foreign joint venture university and two groups of Chinese interlocutors, their Chinese peers and local strangers encountered in public spaces, were investigated. As part of their Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) course assignment in summer 2023, the international students conducted interviews with both groups. This study examines how the intersecting identities and positionality (e.g., racioethnicity, gender, nationality, L2 proficiency) of SA participants, as perceived by Chinese interlocutors mediate socialization processes and access to language socialization opportunities. The findings have direct pedagogical implications for designing language learning experiences to optimize L2 learners' socialization into the local community during study abroad.

2. Literature review

Increasing SA literature advocates for the SLS framework to understand language and intercultural learning processes between SA participants and locals (Duff, 2007, 2019; Wang, 2010). Language Socialization (LS) involves “novices” gaining communicative competence, membership, and legitimacy in a group through communicative practices with “experts” in the community (Duff, 2007; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1987). Much empirical SLS research has also shown that LS is not just a top-down process of cultural transmission from the “experts” to the “novices”; it often involves “active negotiation, and sometimes

contestation of norms and practices by those engaged in them, reflecting individual agency, goals, abilities, and preferences” (Zappa-Hollnan & Duff, 2015, p. 336).

Duff (2019) situates SLS in the multilingual turn in SLA, arguing for its use as a multiscalar approach in transnational domains such as SA to examine multiple dimensions of L2/multilingual development and use. Such a multiscalar approach examines a social event, i.e., a “concrete observable form of practice” (Duff, 2019, p. 10) in relation to broader time, space, and sociocultural contexts and therefore connecting the macro level of ideological structures, meso level of sociocultural institutions and communities, and the micro level of social activities and individual engagement. According to Duff (2019), LS research shifts across the macro-meso-micro scales or levels via *indexicality*, the notion that focal linguistic forms and practices in particular contexts point to (index) salient sociocultural meaning and relationship (such as ideologies, histories and identities), thus signaling newcomer's successful (or unsuccessful) participation and membership in a new culture or community.

In this study, the multiscalar approach advocated by Duff (2019) is used as a core theoretical basis to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of L2 Chinese learners' experiences and their impacts on socialization. The study focuses on the impact of learners' intersecting social identities (i.e., racioethnicity, gender, nationality) and connection with local interlocutors (e.g., Chinese peers, strangers met in public spaces) through L2 interview practices and inquiry discourse. We next review relevant SA literature in these areas.

2.1. Access, identity, positionality, and (lack of) intersectionality in SA

A growing body of literature has revealed that access and socialization experience during SA are inequitable for marginalized SA participants due to intersecting identities and positionalities such as race, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status (e.g., Diao, 2016; Diao & Wang, 2021; Du, 2018; Goldoni, 2017; Kang & Shively, 2024; Lee et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2026). A strand of study on racialized experiences of SA participants of color reported discrimination, microaggression, and other forms of racially biased linguistic challenges towards Black students and heritage learners during study abroad putting them in an inferior position (Anya, 2017; Diao, 2021; Du, 2018; Goldoni, 2018), while white-presenting SA participants enjoy a ‘privileged marginalized other’ position and are privy to superior treatment, elevated social statuses, better job

opportunities, and enhanced flexibility in identity construction (Zhang et al., 2026). Gender has also been a central theme in the literature contrasting male and female SA experiences: American women's SA experiences in various SA destinations revealed cases of gender-based harassment or other forms of challenges which disadvantage women's L2 learning and access to local communities (e.g., Kinginger, 2008, 2009; Diao, 2016, Talburt & Stewart, 1999) while American male participants often benefited from their gender in SA sojourns. Only a handful of the existing SA literature examined the inequitable and marginalized experiences of SA students from Non-Western countries. In one such instance, Lee et al. (2017) reported that students from Asian countries encounter greater discrimination and unfair treatment compared with Western students during their SA sojourn in South Korea.

Despite these gradual increases in SA literature on identities and positionalities, the majority primarily focused only on one of the dimensions. There is still a lack of explicit focus on intersectionality, that is how different social dimensions of SA participants' identities, as they are viewed and positioned by SA participants themselves, by others, and by institutions, intersect with each other to impact SA experiences and access. Diao and Wang's (2021) is one of the few studies that highlighted and promoted the intersectionality of gender, race, and language learning. Through a qualitative study, they examined the in-China SA experiences of three multiracial (White and Chinese) American females. Their findings revealed that the participants did not experience their gender, race, and language abilities as separate categories, but as intertwined facets of their identity that shaped how they were perceived and how they made sense of their experiences. For instance, these women made sense of their gender identity precisely through the negotiation of their multiracial heritage and "Chinese" identities, as well as other intersecting social dimensions including "the languages they spoke and how well they spoke them, personal and familial histories, socioeconomic class, [and] transnational mobility" (Diao & Wang, 2021, p. 52). While Diao and Wang (2021) compellingly showed that intersectionality is central to understanding the SA experiences of multiracial Chinese American females, their study also highlighted the need to examine a wider range of identity configurations. To this end, the diversified participants of the current study offer a unique sample of marginalized SA experiences due to intersecting dimensions of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality, among others. We contribute to gaps in the existing SA literature by examining how these intersecting identities are viewed and

sometimes contested by the SA participants and different local interlocutors, impacting SLS events during SA.

2.2. Social connections between SA participants and locals outside the classroom

SLS research in SA settings has concentrated on SA students' authentic out-of-classroom interactions (Doerr, 2015), with host families (Diao et. al., 2011; Kinginger, 2008; Kinginger & Carnine, 2019; Pryde, 2014; Wilkinson, 1998, 2002), peers (Diao, 2016; Surtee, 2018) or both (Shively, 2016, 2017), pointing to specific social networks as key sites for language development and socialization (See Kennedy Terry, 2023 for a review of social networks with TL speakers during SA.). The literature indicates that for most SA students, host families and peer groups are the most significant and accessible social networks for regular target-language interactions outside the classroom, including daily routines, meals, shopping, homework, leisure activities and shared practices. SA participants rarely form and sustain social relationships with strangers through casual encounters in public spaces like gyms, parks, or coffee shops. Instead, they predominantly rely on "ready-made" social networks arranged by host universities and SA programs.

A critical area of review within SLS research highlights the significance of host family interactions for SA students. In these settings, students often adopt the roles of novices, benefitting from the expert language and cultural guidance of, as well as the "ready-made" social networks provided by their host families. Shiri's (2015) study on Arabic language learners' interactions with their host families during an intensive summer study abroad program in Tunisia offers one such example. Shiri (2015) has noted that the learners positioned themselves as novices open to "expert linguistic and cultural guidance" (p. 21), increasing engagement in novice-expert interactions which McMeekin (2006) found effective in L2 development. Similar novice-expert dynamics are observed by Pryde (2014) based on recordings of real conversations between New Zealand host families and Japanese SA students, showcasing an at times asymmetrical balance of power that echoes a teacher-student relationship. Hosts have frequently dominated the conversation by initiating dialogues with questions they already knew the answers to, following up with evaluative moves, and controlling the conversation flow and topic. Even when students try to initiate an interaction, hosts would steer the exchange or students would revert back to their brief, classroom-like responses, thus sustaining the power imbalance. By incorporating the hosts' perspective, studies have shown that

family members are conscious of their “institutional role” in supporting the study abroad student’s L2 development (Shively, 2016). Consequently, they employ a variety of folk pedagogical styles during meals to engage students in L2 interactions (Kinging & Carnine, 2019)

Peer interactions represent another critical area in the literature and offer insights into a different type of social dynamic between SA participants and locals. For instance, in Surtees’s (2018) examination of Japanese SA participants’ interactions with local peers at a Canadian university, an idealized, relatively symmetrical peer-student dynamic has emerged. Acknowledging their epistemic expertise in the target language, local peers adopt a position of “language helper” without asserting teacher-like authority (e.g., unsolicited correction or editing were viewed as problematic). This dynamic is valued by SA participants who prefer genuine social and non-academic conversations (e.g., gossiping, friendship building) to structured language learning exercises. Surtees (2018) argues against pedagogical assignments designed to optimize peer interaction for language learning, as they fail to replicate the socializing aspects of genuine language exchange.

Primarily focusing on host family and peer interactions, existing SLS literature enriches our understanding of how “ready-made” social networks and a prevalence of novice-expert dynamics impact SA participants’ target language socializing experiences outside of the classroom. Still, a noticeable divergence in attitudes and socializing practices exists between host families and peers as “experts” from the host community. The above review also shows that few studies examined socializing practices and relationships between SA participants and local strangers in public spaces through an SLS lens — an area arguably underexplored. This gap is likely due to the one-time or unpredictable nature of such conversational exchanges with strangers which contrast with recurring socialization routines in the target language sustained with host families (such as dinner-table conversations) or established peer groups (such as dorm talks). Unless required by the SA curriculum (e.g., as part of their assignments), SA participants also often lack the opportunity and confidence to engage with strangers on their own in the target language, especially when it involves more complex or academically inclined discussions involving cultural comparisons—a key area for the development of intercultural competence.

2.3. Interview as a L2 task in SA

With a growing understanding of the purported benefits of SA, or what Kubota (2016) calls the “study-abroad imaginary” (p.349), the necessity of enhancing interactions between L2 learners and native speakers through effective pedagogical interventions is well recognized. One widely implemented approach in both short-term and long-term programs is utilizing interview tasks to “force” L2 learners to initiate conversations with native speakers. The earliest stage of this effort traces back to the adoption of “language fieldwork” in SA programs, advocated by German instructors (Buchheit, 1985; Dodds & Wuttig, 1985). Archangeli (1999) has required students studying abroad in Salzburg to interview two native speakers, one their age and one older. She believes these interviews would reduce students’ fear of speaking and purposefully restricted the first interviewee to young people, perceived as less critical conversational partners. Her study has found increased self-confidence and willingness to interact in the target language based on students’ self-reported data from a post-program questionnaire.

Expanding on the curricular model in Archangeli’s (1999) study, Cadd (2012) demonstrates that structured interviews not only boost students’ confidence in speaking but also foster intercultural competence, reduce anxiety, and promote deeper self-reflection. In a semester-long program, students conduct 12 interviews with native speakers and documented their experiences in blog reflections. These reflections have captured their intercultural growth, comparisons between their communication styles and the target cultures and instances of culture shock. Based on a six-statement survey, Cadd (2012) has found that the interviews decreased anxiety, increased students’ willingness to engage with native speakers beyond assigned tasks, deepened cultural understanding, promoted self-reflection, and improved fluency. However, as with Archangeli’s study, these findings predominantly consist of perceived benefits based on students’ self-assessments.

Similarly, Lee’s (2012) study examined 16 U.S. undergraduate students studying in Granada, Spain for one semester, requiring them to blog about both instructor-selected and self-chosen topics. Analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, Lee found that a combined use of blogs and ethnographic interviews was effective in “empowering SA students’ intercultural awareness and communication” (Lee, 2012, p. 12). Lee recommended incorporating native informants into intercultural learning projects to increase meaningful and authentic communication. In addition, Lee’s study offered a glimpse into the

perceived challenges of interviewing native-speaker peers or host family members, with four out of 16 students reporting an asymmetrical relationship. Without proper ethnographic interview skills, learners often followed pre-scripted questions without engaging in real conversation. Based on this observation, Lee suggested using role-play to improve interview techniques. Although this was not the main focus of Lee's study and only briefly mentioned, it provided a valuable entry point for this study, motivating us to explore the causes of imbalanced dynamics, its potential association with "novice-expert" power dynamics documented in SLS studies, and how pre-interview rehearsals can enhance communication.

The reviewed studies have concluded the positive effects of the interview tasks based on students' self-assessments, without measures of actual L2 performance. No standardized tests or statistical measures, such as pre- and post-tests, were used to evaluate actual linguistic and cultural gains. This could lead to over- or under-estimating the actual benefits and challenges. Furthermore, without a qualitative analysis of the interaction between L2 learners and native speakers, these studies lack insight into the factors behind the perceived challenges.

A review of the existing literature reveals a gap between two domains of research. The first subscribes to an SLS perspective, viewing interactions in the target language as negotiated socialization processes. Within this framework, SA participants are seen as "novices" engaging with local community members, the "experts," through a lens shaped by ideologies, such as their views on each other's identities and positionalities. Existing SA literature focuses on SLS interactions that occur naturally, without intentional pedagogical design, which foster genuine relationship building and integration into the local communities of practice. The second body of literature prioritizes L2 learning as the paramount objective of SA programs over other things such as developing membership in the target society. Within this context, forced L2 interactions, such as interview tasks undertaken by SA students with locals, are viewed primarily as a means to enhance L2 proficiency and immersion in the target language. This perspective often leads to pedagogical practices which oversee or even compromise learners' participation in authentic intercultural communication and socialization.

This study aims to bridge these two perspectives by critically examining a common pedagogical task –semi-structured L2 interview focusing on culture comparison with local peers and strangers—through an SLS lens. We

acknowledge that the interview tasks were initially designed by the instructors and understood by the students merely as class assignments, potentially risking reducing local interlocutors to instrumental targets for language practices. However, by reconceptualizing these tasks as valuable structured sites for L2 socialization, and by analyzing the socio-cultural processes that unfold within them, this study has valuable implication for future educators to frame and utilize L2 interview tasks to expand SA participants' access and engagement with the L2 discourse communities, fostering critical growth in intercultural competence.

On one hand, by incorporating an SLS viewpoint and methodology, the study stands to enhance language programs in SA contexts, traditionally informed by the second research perspective. A nuanced, moment-by-moment analysis of student experiences conducting L2 interview tasks unveils important socio-cultural factors that facilitate or hinder communication between L2 learners and local interlocutors. The insights gained provide practical solutions to communicative and emotional struggles identified in prior studies. Therefore, this study underscores the significance of augmenting SA programs with SLS objectives - that is, helping students develop and negotiate proper identities and membership in the target language community. On the other hand, this study contributes to the SLS field by comparing SA participants' L2 socialization within established networks of their interactions with strangers during L2 interview tasks, an understudied area. Methodologically, the current study is significant for its close examination of recorded L2 interview exchanges between Chinese-learning international students and local community members. This approach provides a deeper understanding of these "forced" interactions and their role in SA participants' socialization in the target language with familiar local peers and complete strangers encountered for the first time in public settings.

This study examines the following research questions: What are CSL learners' socializing interactions with local peers and strangers like through L2 interview tasks? How do CSL learners' intersecting identities and positionalities ("novice" to the target community, racioethnicity, nationality, gender, L2 proficiency) impact their interview experiences?

3. The study

3.1. Site

This study derives from a broader project examining language learning and study abroad during a seven-week intensive Chinese course at the level of intermediate high¹ during the summer of 2023 at an English-medium Sino-foreign joint-venture university (JVU) in summer 2023. The course participants are primarily full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate international students who comprise 30% of JVU's student body. This situation sets the research site apart from typical Chinese study abroad programs², where students generally return to their home institutions after their studies.

3.2. Participants

Eight degree-seeking international students - three males and five females, averaging 20 years in age - from the advanced-intermediate³ summer Chinese course volunteered for this study. Six of them participated in a focus-group interview based on their survey responses and written reflections (see Appendix for details of the written reflection guides). Their basic background information can be found from Table (1). Students marked with an asterisk are those who are foreign-presenting students, that is, whose physical appearance suggests that they are foreigners.

TABLE (1)

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

Pseudo nym	Gender	Citizenship	Self-identified Racio-ethnic group	Length of sojourn in China	Length of studying Chinese
Kevin	Male	USA	Asian, Burmese*	2 years	2 years
Anna	Female	USA & Japan	Asian, White	2 years	7 years
Zoe	Female	Vietnam	Asian, Vietnamese	6 months	1.5 years
Jayna	Female	Vietnam	Asian, Vietnamese	6 months	1 year

¹ Intermediate High here refers to the ACTFL proficiency scale.

² Participants in this study are enrolled in a four-year bachelor's program in China, with one semester spent as exchange students at a partner university in the United States. However, because of the travel restriction during the pandemic, as shown in Table (1), most had spent less than a year in China at the time of the study, while two had been there for two years.

³ All Chinese L2 students are required to take two years of Chinese language classes. Apart from these language courses, all other degree-related classes are conducted in English, regardless of whether the students are native speakers of Chinese.

Frank	Male	USA	South Asian, Gujarati*	7 months	3.5 years
Keran	Female	Mongolia	Asian	7 months	2 years
Richard	Male	USA & Brazil	White, Latino*	7 months	2 years
Tina	Female	Mongolia	Asian	7 months	6 years

3.3. The structured interview task

For their final class project, which accounts for 15% of their grade, students are required to complete an interview task. According to the course material, the objective of this pedagogical task is to extend classroom discussions on sociocultural topics that always involve cultural comparison into the local community while allowing students to further develop their inquiry skills—ideally, ethnographic interview skills. Although not explicitly stated by the instructors, the two researchers view the design of this structured interview task as a potential effort to socialize students into making culturally appropriate inquiries and engaging in formal or academic discourse on cultural comparison within a relatively informal setting.

As part of this project, students must conduct an interview with a native Chinese speaker in a public setting during a midterm field trip, gathering opinions on a Chinese cultural concept or practice of their choice. The selected concept or practice must be one covered in the course lessons.

The project takes place during the fourth week of this seven-week program. Over the first two days, students identify a commonly observed scenario in China that they will use as a prompt to elicit opinions from their interviewees and then draft corresponding interview questions. The chosen scenario should reflect one of the cultural themes covered in the course. For instance, two students come up with a scenario in which a young Chinese woman attends a blind date arranged by her parents—a common situation that can illuminate multiple cultural concepts, including filial piety, marriage as a social obligation, and parental involvement in marriage.

After the initial planning, students rehearse their interviews in class, refining their questioning techniques, strengthening their interaction skills, and making any necessary adjustments to their interview plans. They then conduct one practice interview with their Chinese peers outside of class as a final rehearsal. Students were not instructed on how to recruit practice partners, but all ultimately chose peers they already knew, typically from events like Chinese Table or teaching assistants they had previously interacted with. On Friday of

week four, students conduct their formal interviews with strangers during their mid-term field trip. While not required, all eight students opted to conduct their interviews outside the Suzhou Museum, the main destination of their trip.

As part of the final project, students record both their practice interviews with peers and their formal interviews with strangers, submitting the recordings and transcriptions to the instructor. These materials serve as integral data for the current study, as outlined below.

3.4. Data Collection

3.4.1. Collecting interview data

As noted above, students were required to record both their peer and stranger interviews and submit the audio files and transcripts as part of their course assessment. Recording permission was obtained in advance. The final dataset consisted of 86 minutes of recorded interaction: 58 minutes with peers and 28 minutes with strangers.

3.4.2. Collecting perception data

Perception data includes (i) survey questionnaires, (ii) students' written reflections, and (iii) semi-structured interviews with a focal group of six students conducted within two weeks of completing their interviews. The surveys collected demographic information and students' perceptions of the interview process, while the English-language reflections elicited more in-depth qualitative evaluations, guided by researcher-developed prompts.

3.5. Data analysis

3.5.1. Analyze interview data

Both thematic and discourse analyses were employed to analyze the interview recordings. In the first stage of thematic analysis, a global qualitative approach was used. All qualitative data were imported into NVivo 9 to identify frequently recurring themes for each participant. In the second stage, utilizing discourse analytic methods (Bloome et al., 2005), we proceeded to closely analyze the interview social interactions taking place between the student interviewers and their interviewees. The 86-minute recordings were transcribed and used as corpus. Following Lockhart and Ng (1995), the researchers first selected a random sample of six transcripts (three from peer interviews and three from stranger interviews) from the total of 16 transcripts. This selective approach was necessary to manage the volume of data, as noted

by (Ochs, 1979). Through repeated readings of these transcripts, researchers identified salient features and interaction patterns, focusing on misunderstandings, power dynamics, and the level of involvement and contribution from each interlocutor.

Based on these observations, a preliminary set of categories was developed to describe the dominant interaction patterns in the six examined interactions. Subsequently, the remaining 10 transcripts were then examined and classified according to the interaction pattern they exhibited. For example, the phrase “oh, okay, then...” (哦 · 好的 · 那.....) frequently appears as a dominant interactional pattern, indicating students’ difficulty in transitioning between questions or their incomplete comprehension of the interviewee’s response. Once identified, this pattern was used to categorize additional excerpts from all eight students’ transcripts, including variations such as “well, okay, so...” (嗯 · 好的 · 所以.....). A systematic, line-by-line examination aimed to understand the emotion dynamics within these social exchanges, particularly in relation to CSL learners’ intersecting identities and positionalities.

3.5.2. Analyze interview data

Following the analysis of interview data, the three sets of perception data including survey responses, written reflections, and post-task focal interviews were further compared with the interview data to enhance the validity of the analysis through triangulation. Particularly, to establish interrater reliability, the analysis of the perception data proceeded in multiple stages. First, two authors independently reviewed all perception data to identify preliminary themes. Following this initial coding, the two authors of the study separately analyzed the same dataset, applying and refining the emerging codes. The authors then compared their analyses in a series of calibration meetings, resolving discrepancies through discussion and reaching consensus on code definitions, thematic boundaries, and interpretations. This iterative process ensured convergence across raters and strengthened the robustness and reliability of the analytical approach.

4. Results

To answer each question, we begin with a broad summary of the findings from all eight students before focusing on one or two students’ experience as a representative case. A detailed narrative analysis was conducted on all

participants, capturing both the shared patterns and individual differences among them.

4.1. CFL learners' (non-)socializing interactions with peers and strangers

Students tended to judge their interviews with peers as “successful,” a perception that diverged sharply from how they viewed their interactions with strangers. This perceived success, however, was based on an overly simplified criterion—namely, whether they could complete the scripted interview smoothly and be understood by the native-speaker interviewees. By this standard, peer interviews felt easier and thus “successful,” because peers were eager to help and rarely challenged the interactional flow.

Yet, this sense of success had little connection to the actual extent of socializing efforts observed in the recordings. In peer interactions, both sides made minimal effort to socialize beyond the script, resulting in limited meaning negotiation. In contrast, interviews with strangers displayed substantially more socializing effort, particularly from the native Chinese speakers. However, students' ability to access or capitalize on these socializing moves was often constrained by their linguistic limitations and their perceived social identities, which made these interactions feel less smooth and therefore “less successful,” despite being socially richer.

All eight participants attributed the perceived “success” and ease of communication with Chinese peers to their ready-made relationship with their peers although only three regarded their peers as friends—one of whom considered their peer a very close friend—while the others described them as mere acquaintances. Jayna said, “[m]y interview with my Chinese peer was more successful because we are close already.” Kevin said, “there is already a sense of friendliness between us. [...] Since we were comfortable with each other, I did not stutter or had to think too much about follow up questions.”

However, a closer examination of students' rationales for their perceived success reveals reasons such as being “able to ask all the questions and get answers” and “stay on topic for the whole interview.” These comments suggest that students view the interview primarily as a language practice exercise, perceiving their peers as instruments for language learning rather than interviewees whose responses genuinely interest them. This expectation likely stems from the pedagogical design of the task, in which interviews with peers

are framed as rehearsals—a purpose explicitly communicated to students by the instructor.

Discourse analysis of peer interview recordings reveals that the interviews went smoothly because the peer interviewees, as sympathetic interlocutors, perceive participating in the interview as a way to help their friends complete their learning tasks. Instead of overtly adopting an authoritative role to dominate the conversation with moves such as unsolicited correction and initiating new topics, most peer interviewees exerted “native-speaker expertise” in a more subtle manner to accommodate and sustain the conversation. In general, peer interviewees prioritized maintaining the flow of conversation over negotiating meaning, aiming to prevent embarrassment or communication breakdowns. This pattern was consistently observed across all eight peer interviews, particularly when students’ linguistic errors or content confusion significantly hindered comprehension. Rather than seeking clarification, peer interviewees responded immediately, often bypassing opportunities for deeper engagement or mutual understanding. These responses were likely influenced by the peer interviewee’s prior knowledge of the students’ study content or simply by reading from the students’ interview question list. As a result, the interaction became more of a scripted exchange rather than a dynamic conversation, limiting opportunities for authentic language use and negotiation of meaning.

In contrast, the level of accommodation from strangers was significantly lower compared to Chinese peers. Challenges such as mispronunciation, abrupt topic shifts, and overly broad questions, which were minor issues with peers, became significant obstacles with less sympathetic interviewees. Examples from interviews done by Anna and Tina can further explain the difference between stranger and peer interviewees.

4.1.1. A comparison of Anna’s interaction with a peer and a stranger

Anna is a student of mixed American and Japanese heritage. For her interview, she chooses the topic of “group consciousness” (群体意识 *qúntǐ yìshí*) and “following the crowd” (隨大流 *suí dàliú*), a concept introduced in the textbook as a common phenomenon in Chinese culture. She connects this idea to a concrete practice—checking in at must-visit influencer spots for tourists—and asks her interviewees whether they are interested in this type of activity.

When formulating her question, Anna uses the phrase "hěn hóng de dìfāng" (很红的地方), which literally translates to "a very red spot" but is commonly used to mean "a very popular spot." However, in Chinese, the word "red" (红 hóng) carries another connotation, referring to communist and revolutionary history. For example, tourism centered around the cultural heritage and ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and revolutionary history is known as "Red Tourism" (红色旅游 hóngsè lǚyóu).

As shown in Excerpt (1), the ambiguity of the term "red" in Chinese, combined with the lack of contextual cues, prompted the interviewee to seek clarification by asking Anna to rephrase her question and distinguish between the two possible meanings. This response can be seen as an implicit effort to guide Anna toward a more conventional way of describing a social media trending location. However, no such meaning negotiation occurred in Anna's interview with her peer⁴, leaving her unprepared for the potential confusion she later faced in the second interview.

Another subtle expression of confusion can be observed in the Chinese interviewee's response to Anna's question about her origin. Instead of asking a complete question like "Where are you from?" (你是哪里人? Nǐ shì nǎlǐ rén?), Anna simply used a single word: "Where?" (哪里的? Nǎlǐ de?). This abbreviated and abrupt phrasing is potentially ambiguous, as it could refer to a number of things—such as one's hometown, school, or workplace. Furthermore, the bluntness of the question may come across as impolite or even intrusive, evoking the tone of a police interrogation. Although it's unclear whether the interviewee was offended, her long pause and hesitant tone clearly reflect confusion in response to this unconventional way of asking the question. Interestingly, during her interview with the Chinese peer, Anna also posed the question in a similarly incomplete form: "Come from where?" (是从哪里来的? Shì cóng nǎlǐ lái de?). Although there was a brief pause that likely indicated confusion, the interviewee responded promptly without any need for clarification or negotiation of meaning.

⁴ Due to the limited space, we are not presenting Anna's interaction with her peer with line-by-line analysis. In that interview, Anna asked exactly the same question as shown in Excerpt (1), "Have you been to a very red, check in place?" while the interviewee answered her question immediately.

EXCERPT (1)

"A VERY RED SPOT"

Line	Speaker	Utterances	Additional Contextualization
1	Anna	你的工作是什么？ What's your job?	
2	Stranger	学生。 Student.	
3	Anna	学生·哦。 Student. OK.	
5	Anna	哪里的？ Where?	
6	Stranger	唔...哪里的？ Er...where?	In hesitant voice
7	Anna	[笑] [Laugh]	
8	Stranger	哪里的学生？ (You meant) where do I study?	
9	Anna	嗯 Yes.	
10	Stranger	哦·...扬州大学的。 Oh, Yangzhou University.	Fast speed
11	Anna	你去过很红的打(大)卡的地方吗?嗯·很红的地方打 卡吗？ Have you been to a very red, check in place? Hmmm...a very red place for check-in?	Self-correction
12	Stranger	呃...去过 Yes, I have been to.	Short hesitation
13	Anna	啊·比如说·哪里？ Ah! for example, where?	In hesitant voice
14	Stranger	很红的地方？ Very red place?	
15	Anna	[对] [yeah]	Confirm in low voice
16	Stranger	是指.....红色文化吗？还是网红的地方？ Do you refer to the "Red Culture" or those social media trending spots?	Long hesitation
17	Anna	哦·不是·是很热门的地方 Oh, no. I meant trending spots.	

4.1.2. Tina's unsuccessful attempt to use an academic term

Like Anna, Tina also struggled to frame a complete question. As shown in Lines 1 and 3 of Excerpt (2), she attempted to elicit the interviewee's opinion on the concept of "group consciousness" (群体意识 *qúntǐ yìshí*) but ended up relying on fragmented phrases. Moreover, like most students, Tina's questioning technique was deficient; she repeatedly asked unwieldy questions such as "What is your opinion on X?", "Do you know X?", and "Do you like X?" without offering any background information about this relatively formal academic term. As a result, beyond the inherent difficulty of the concept itself, Tina's limited linguistic proficiency further hampered the interviewee's ability to connect her speech with the intended meaning. Confronted with the interviewee's confusion, Tina demonstrated limited ability to rephrase the term using simpler language. Her frustration, evident in Lines 5 and 7, highlighted a growing sense of powerlessness in the face of communication breakdown. After several unsuccessful attempts, Tina moved on to the next question on her list, which her interviewee comprehended better, providing her with unexpected reassurance. Yet, disappointingly, upon confirming this understanding, Tina reverted to her initial overly broad and grammatically incomplete line of questioning (Line 9).

EXCERPT (2)

ON GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS - INTERVIEW WITH A STRANGER

Line	Speaker	Utterances	Additional Contextualization
1	Tina	群体意识的看法·你的 Opinion of group consciousness, yours	
2	Stranger	没听懂· I do not understand.	
3	Tina	群体意识·你知道·群体意识和个体意识·中国的文化 Group consciousness, you know, Group consciousness and individual consciousness, China's culture.	
4	Stranger	I don't understand.	Switched to English
5	Tina	啊·好·你知道群体意识吗? Ah, okay, do you know collectivism?	"Ah" contains strong disappointing tone
6	Stranger	群体意识? Collectivism?	

7	Tina	群众.....中文.....OH MY GOD! People...Chinese...OH MY GOD 那你喜欢随大流吗? So do you like following the crowd?	Screamed "OMG"
8	Stranger	不喜欢 I do not.	
9	Tina	啊！你对随大流的想法 Ah, your opinion on following the crowd	"Ah" contains reassuring tone here

Similar to Anna's experience, in Tina's earlier interview with her Chinese peer, she posed the same fragmented question without any background information. Despite this, the interviewee responded without hesitation, offering a deliberately slow and elaborate answer. The language used was sophisticated—well beyond Tina's level of proficiency. It was evident that Tina had limited understanding of the response, as shown by her repeated, simplistic acknowledgments like "Oh, okay," and her mechanical transition to the next scripted question without making any meaningful connection to what the peer had just said.

The recorded interactions with the peer and stranger align with Tina's self-evaluation of the two distinct experiences. Reflecting on the peer interview, she noted that the peer was "nice and did not show any negative facial expressions" and "could understand my Chinese very well." In contrast, Tina described feeling "a bit embarrassed" during the interview with strangers due to her lack of confidence in Chinese, adding, "I felt they would judge me, but later I realized no one really cares."

4.2. CSL learners' intersecting identities and positionalities impacting interview experiences

Findings from students' survey responses and written reflections indicate that students are acutely aware of both their own and their interviewees' racial, ethnic, gender, and national identities, and believe these factors influence their interactions with local individuals. Such awareness and beliefs are reflected in their choices of interviewees. For example, there was a clear consensus among the eight participants in favor of interviewing female individuals within a similar age range, based on the assumption that they would be "more sympathetic" (Zoe) and thus facilitate smoother communication.

Additionally, five of the eight participants believed that their racial, ethnic, gender, or national identity may have shaped how strangers responded to them. Four participants, in particular, speculated that a different racial or ethnic identity might have elicited different reactions from local interviewees. These perceptions appeared to be influenced by their rejection experiences. When approaching local Chinese individuals for street interviews, six out of eight participants reported that their initial interview requests were explicitly rejected. Among the six students who experienced rejection, five of them are female and racio-ethnically unmarked participants (i.e., Zoe, Jayna, Anna, Tina and Keran); compared with the three male and foreign-presenting students (i.e., Kevin, Frank and Richard), they encountered more rejection when approaching local strangers, as shown in Table (2).

Interview recordings and student reflections showed that perceived foreigner identity created different communication barriers for different students. For example, Anna, who identifies as biracial Japanese American, said that “my raci[o]-ethnic ambiguity does not help. Others that look clearly foreign are talked to with generally more open hands, lower language expectations, and higher praise.” This observation was echoed by Vietnamese students Jayna and Zoe, who believed that they were potentially perceived as scammers because their Asian-presenting appearances resemble Chinese citizens, which in turn undermined the credibility of their request for assistance with this interview as a Chinese class project.

TABLE (2)
NUMBER OF REJECTIONS EXPERIENCED

Pseudo nym	Gender	Citizenship	Self-identified Racio-ethnic group	Number of Rejections Experienced
Kevin	Male	USA	Asian, Burmese*	0
Anna	Female	USA & Japan	Asian, White	2
Zoe	Female	Vietnam	Asian, Vietnamese	2
Jayna	Female	Vietnam	Asian, Vietnamese	3
Frank	Male	USA	South Asian, Gujarati*	1
Keran	Female	Mongolia	Asian	3
Richard	Male	USA & Brazil	White, Latino*	0
Tina	Female	Mongolia	Asian	1

The only two students who did not encounter refusal were both males with a racio-ethnic background displaying a foreign appearance in China. Both

of them, Kevin, a Burmese student from Myanmar, and Richard, a multiracial student from the US who self-identifies as both white and Latino, are fully aware of the boosting effect of their transparent foreignness. Richard, for instance, commented that “I think being a white American means that I at least appear similar to the typical tourist, so that may have made me less intimidating or more normal to interact with.” Frank, an American student of South Asian descent, also racially marked in China, was initially declined once in his interview attempt, described his interviewees’ attitude as “initially hesitant” but quite encouraging due to him being foreign looking. He also linked the willingness of local Chinese interviewees to a form of native-speakerism, wherein some Chinese individuals were inclined to teach their own culture to the perceived “foreigner.” Interestingly, there is a prevalent belief among students that a visibly foreign appearance confers advantages during interviews with locals. For example, the Vietnamese student Jayna believes her “whiter [-presenting]” friends are perceived as “typical” and therefore “less intimidating.”

However, very few, including the foreign-presenting students themselves, recognize the accompanying challenges. In fact, despite the differing likelihoods of encountering rejection—which may suggest an advantage for male and foreign-presenting students—what students often overlook is that visible foreignness, while potentially encouraging more surface-level interactions due to native-speakerism, can also provoke defensive reactions that complicate the I SLS experiences.

Students, particularly the three foreign-presenting students, Frank, Kevin and Richard, grappled with cultural misinterpretations arising from various factors. Beyond linguistic challenges, particularly in listening comprehension, their inquiry topics sometimes triggered cultural stereotypes, provoking defensive responses from Chinese interviewees, often accompanied by patriotic sentiments as they perceived the foreigner’s questions as criticism. Cultural misinterpretations by native speakers often result in implicit socialization, teaching students how to navigate cultural comparisons that may easily trigger stereotype-based tensions. The environmental context of these interactions exacerbates misunderstandings. These communication barriers are closely tied to the students’ identities as visible foreigners, especially when their questions touch on potentially stereotypical perspectives. The following two cases, drawn from interviews conducted by Richard and Frank, illustrate these dynamics in greater detail.

Excerpt (3) illustrates this through Richard's interview with a 25-year-old male on the street, demonstrating the complex interplay of these intersecting factors and how they collectively give rise to unforeseen misunderstandings. It particularly shows how minor frustration originated from a misunderstanding mainly coming out of linguistic inadequacy may escalate quickly when compounded by other elements. Before asking his question (Line 1), Richard presented a scenario with two options: a restaurant that aligns with one's taste but lacks popularity, and one that is trendy but offers mediocre food. However, due to his linguistic limitations, Richard inadvertently guided the interviewee to choose a combination of both options — a restaurant with excellent taste and widespread popularity. Although Richard understood the literal meaning of the short response "I will wait" (我会等), he failed to probe deeper to clarify the choice. In fact, he remained oblivious to the misunderstanding even after the interviewee elaborated on his reasons (Lines 4 and 8). The sentence-final particle 啊 (which can convey dissatisfaction or complaint, especially when drawn out, as in this case) in both lines and the rhetorical question in Line 4 indicate the interviewee's underlying impatience, suggesting that he thought the justification was too obvious. This impatience escalated, shown by the interviewee's raised voice (Line 10) and a direct interruption of Richard to correct him when Richard mistakenly paraphrased his reasoning (Line 9). This frustration likely stemmed not only from persistent communication failures and a possible negative misperception of Richard's intentions, suggesting that as a foreigner, he was reinforcing a stereotype of Chinese people as conformists. Unfortunately, such perception was inadvertently affirmed in the subsequent conversation.

EXCERPT (3)

"WHICH RESTAURANT WILL YOU GO TO?"

Line	Speaker	Utterances	Additional Contextualization
1	Richard	你会去哪个? You will go to which?	A tour guide is speaking through a megaphone in the background. The noise is getting louder and closer.
2	Stranger	我会等 I will wait 等一下·去那个流行的	
3	Richard	Wait for a while, go to that popular one 那为什么? then why?	

4	Stranger	因为那个值得吃啊·如果那个不好的话·我为什么要去吃呢? Because that worth the wait. If that is not good, why do I eat there?	Impatient tone. Laughing voice towards the end.
5	Richard	哦·好·那(2)呢·你觉得 like 大部分的中国人会·会·也会去·去那个流行的 Okay. So...hmmm...you think, like, most Chinese people will, will, will also go, go to that popular one	In laughing voice
6	Stranger	嗯 Yes	
7	Richard	那为什么? Then why?	
8	Stranger	因为大家知道那个好吃啊 Because they know that one is tasty	Loud cicada chirping begins in the background
9	Richard	好·因为有很多人 Ok. Because there are many people.	
		嗯·对 Yeah	
10	Stranger	不是·是因为好吃 No, because it is tasty 不是因为人多 Not because of many people	Suddenly raised volume
11	Richard	哦·所以你会去那个 Oh, so you will go to that	
12	Stranger	好吃的 The tasty one	Interruption from the stranger
13	Richard	好吃的·哦·好好好 The tasty one. Oh, ok, ok, ok.	

Following the interaction in Excerpt (3), a significant misunderstanding occurred when Richard awkwardly transitioned to his main question on collectivism. The interviewee mistakenly heard the word 群体意识 (collectivism, *qúntǐ yìshì*) as 升旗仪式 (flag-raising ceremony, *shēngqí yíshì*). Despite Richard's accurate pronunciation, the miscommunication likely stemmed from the listener's assumptions about non-native speakers' linguistic capabilities. The

abstract term "collectivism," might not have been anticipated in the lexicon of a non-native speaker, leading the listener to misconstrue it as a completely different term. Furthermore, the abrupt change of topics without a smooth transition further contributed to the confusion.

Without recognizing the misinterpretation from either party, the conversation diverged from the intended interview topic. The interviewee's emotional responses were evident when Richard used 随大流 (following the crowd), linked to the misunderstood "flag-raising ceremony." 随大流 connotes blind conformism, which mischaracterized the politically and culturally significant flag-raising ceremony, provoking the interviewee. The phrase "from the heart" (发自内心的) was reiterated thrice in quick succession, signifying an urgent intent to rectify the misperception by emphasizing genuine patriotism. Both parties failed to see that the tension arose from a fundamental linguistic miscommunication, not differing views on collectivism.

EXCERPT (4)

"PATRIOTISM COMES FROM THE HEART"

Line	Speaker	Utterances	Additional Contextualization
1	Richard	所以你觉得 (1) 你 · 你听说过 · 群体意识? So, you think, you, you heard about, collectivism?	
2	Stranger	啊? Uh? 升旗仪式啊? 啊 · 听说 Flag raising ceremony? Ah, have heard about it.	
3	Richard	对 · 你觉得中国人 · 有这样以上想 · 想法? Yes, you think Chinese people, have this above thou, thought?	
4	Stranger	想法? Thought?	
5	Richard	想法 · 对 like Thought, yes, like 比如说 · 随大流 · 这样 For example, follow the crowd, like this	

6	Stranger	是一种·行·呃·是一种文化吧·或者说·就是一种说·发自内心的东西 Is a kind of, beha(vior), umm, is a kind of culture, or in another word, is a kind of, that is, something coming from the heart	Loud cicada chirping begins in the background
7	Richard	嗯·那·我再问你· Well, then, I again ask you 你觉得中国人有这样的群体意识·比如说随大流? You think Chinese people have such collectivism, like follow the crowd?	
8	Stranger	哦·不是随大流·这不是随大流 O, not following the crowd, this is not following the crowd	
9	Richard	你觉得中国人 You think Chinese people	
10	Stranger	这是发自内心的 This is from one's heart 爱国是发自内心的·是爱一个国家才会做的事情· Patriotism comes from the heart, it is something one does out of love for a country	Interruption
11	Richard	哦·ok·但是·所以·嗯·所以·你觉得 like·中国没有那个随大流的 Oh, ok, but, so, ummmm, so, you think like, China does not have that following the crowd	
12	Stranger	哦·没有很多随大流·而是发自内心的 Oh, no many following the crowd, instead it's from one's heart	

Unaware of the misunderstanding throughout the interview, Richard, however, recognized the undercurrents of tension in his written reflection, deeming the interview unsuccessful and recalling his emotional disturbance: “The interview flustered me a little bit, so I never overcame that sense of disconnect.” Rather than associating the confusion with the misunderstanding, Richard attributed it to gender, asserting that “men in China are generally harder to understand than women.” He believed male interviewees were less accommodating, supported by his observation that “rather than slowing down his speech or enunciating more, [he] just repeated it louder not slowing down his speech.”

Reflecting further in the written reflection and focus interview, Richard ascribed the challenges predominantly to his limited linguistic proficiency and the interviewee's lack of accommodation. He also acknowledged potential distractions like the interviewee's hurry and adverse environmental conditions of noise and heat. Yet, he seemed unaware that his foreign appearance might also have contributed to the communication barriers. Instead, he perceived his racio-ethnic identity as a white American to be an asset, rendering him "less intimidating" and "more normal to interact with," akin to a typical tourist.

Unlike his classmate Richard, Frank, an Indian American student, experienced a seemingly smoother interview. His interview focused on societal pressures related to arranged marriages. After the interviewee expressed her refusal to marry the person chosen by her parents, Frank inquired about her strategies for persuading them otherwise. The initial part of this interview (Lines 1-6, Excerpt 5) showcases an explicit socialization attempt from the Chinese interviewee and her friend, who tried to correct Frank's mispronouncing the polyphonic character 说. Unlike Chinese peers who might avoid such face-threatening actions to correct someone, the interviewee's friend promptly corrected Frank. This correction, addressing a minor error occasionally even accepted or made by native speakers, in fact marked an early sign of tension and subtly shifted the power dynamics, casting the interviewee into an instructive role. This explicit correction also disrupted the flow of the interview, implicitly undermining the interviewer's legitimacy to engage in meaningful discussion due to his perceived linguistic deficiency. In his written reflection, Frank wrote:

I think also being a visually foreign person increased engagement from Chinese interviewees, and interestingly made them more forthcoming not only about their own viewpoints but on their views on Chinese society as a whole. I think my foreign identity and appearance made them more verbose and less afraid to patronize me with an explanation about Chinese culture.

Following this correction, the interviewee articulated her resistance to the idea of persuading and a preference for mutual tolerance. Notably, her ambiguous use of pronouns and a far-fetched analogy comparing the difficulty of parents' understanding their children to the vast cultural divide between Chinese and Americans significantly redirected the conversation, indicating a defensive posture. For instance, without clear referents for the pronouns 他/她

(he/she) in Line 9, and 他们 (they) and 我们 (we) in Line 11, the interviewee seemed to highlight the complexities of cross-cultural communication rather than issues of marriage. This focus suggested that to the interviewee, the challenges of mutual understanding and tolerance between Chinese and Americans are more immediate concerns than societal pressures related to marriage.

It is difficult to ascertain what precisely prompted the interviewee to deviate from the original topic, but Frank tried to interpret this by questioning his own approach: "I feel that she resented the situation I presented, [viewing it] as a provincial misunderstanding of modern Chinese society on my part." Frank believed he could have a completely different experience if he were of a "more Chinese" appearance, regardless of how foreign he actually is.

EXCERPT (5)

"MUTUALLY ACCOMMODATING IS BETTER THAN PERSUADING"

Line	Speaker	Utterances	Additional Contextualization
1	Frank	你会做什么说 (shuō) 服你的父母? What will you do to persuade your parents?	
2	Stranger	说 (shuō) 服我的父母? Shuō fú (persuade) my parents?	Raising tone. Present it as a question.
3	Frank	说 (shuō) 服 shuō fú (persuade)	
4	Stranger	说 (shuō) 服我的父母 Persuade my parents	Talk to herself
5	Stranger's friend	说 (shuì) 服, 多音字·它是一个多音字。 Shuì fú (persuade). Polyphonic character, it is a polyphonic character.	Excitement and laughter
6	Frank	噢·说 (shuì) 服 Oh, shuì fú	
7	Stranger	不打算说服他们 Not going to persuade them 我觉得每个人从出生接受的教育 I think the way people are educated from birth	

8	Frank	嗯 Mm-hmm	
		他/她的思想是很难被改变的。我只要改变自己就好了。我不需要说服他们。我们应该互相包容理解。就像我可能有时候也不太懂美国人在干什么。美国人也不太懂中国人在干什么。	
9	Stranger	Their way of thinking is very hard to change. It's better for me to change myself; I don't need to persuade them. We should mutually accommodate and understand each other. Just like sometimes I may not quite understand what Americans are doing, and Americans might not understand what Chinese people are doing.	Increasing speed with an assertive tone
10	Frank	嗯 Mm-hmm	
		但是他们会比较包容。啊。因为他是国外的。他们生长环境不一样。所以他们才会有一些不同的举止。我们包容就好了。互相理解就好了。不用说服他。	
11	Stranger	But they will be more accommodating, ah, because he is from abroad. Their upbringing is different, so they have some different behaviors. We should just be accommodating and understand each other. There's no need to persuade him.	

5. Discussion

Echoing previous SA literature (e.g., Duff, 2019) on adult SA participants' lack of access to meaningful L2 practices outside of the classroom, the line-by-line analysis of interview excerpts in this study adds insights into the different nature of the student-peer and student-stranger interview dynamics. Peer interviewees demonstrated sympathetic accommodation and reluctance to adopt a teacher-like authority role, aligning with findings from Surtees' (2018) study. Their accommodation enhanced students' confidence in completing the interview task by simply going through the interview scripts, corroborating claims of boosted confidence in previous studies (Cadd, 2012; Lee, 2012). However, excessive accommodation, such as ignoring linguistic errors and ineffective interview questions and volunteering unsolicited answers, largely reduced SA participants' socializing opportunities into inquiry and meaning-

negotiation practices in Chinese. This also led to students' over-optimism about completing the interview and negligence of potential challenges and misunderstanding, which became more pronounced in interviews with strangers.

The local strangers reacted more intuitively and critically to students' linguistic and interview deficiencies, directly stating comprehension difficulties and correcting mispronunciation. The comparison of student-peer and student-stranger interactions by Anna and Tina showcased how local strangers afforded more SLS opportunities into practices of formal inquiry and meaning-negotiation in Chinese. We see more evidence of socializing and guiding attempts toward preferred L2 inquiry discourse and strategy, such as moves of clarifying the cultural nuances of certain terms used by the students, pointing to the need to define culturally laden words and academic terminology when first introduced, or modeling a conventional way of describing a social media trending place. While discourse analysis and self-reported data both indicate an increased level of student anxiety and frustration with local strangers, viewed through a SLS lens, challenging engagement with local experts "provide(s) an opportunity space for socialization" (Ochs, 1991, p. 46). However, while instances were observed where students accepted pronunciation correction and responded to local strangers' request for meaning clarification at the linguistic level, our data show little evidence of students recognizing the implied socializing intent, nor did the student immediately adopt any specific discourse strategies in Chinese modeled by the local interlocutors. What might be plausible barriers hindering SA student engagement in the SLS opportunities during these L2 interview exchanges?

First, students' insufficient interview skills, unfamiliarity with L2 inquiry discourse, and intermediate-level Chinese proficiency limited the range and depth of the questions asked and follow-up strategies performed. While often overlooked in self-reported data, students' insufficient discourse-level elicitation and follow-up strategies became obvious under a discourse analytical lens. Echoing Lee's (2012) finding, in our study many students heavily relied on prepared questions and simple, predetermined follow-up inquiries. Student participants' Chinese language skills were often insufficient to unpack complex and lengthy answers from the local strangers, particularly those containing metaphorical or jargon-laden expressions. This left little space for further meaning inquiry and negotiation necessary for sustaining SLS. There was a noticeable misalignment between students limited linguistic capacities and

cultural nuances and the complex nature of the interview topics of cultural comparison. Overly broad questions, or those inadvertently reinforcing negative Chinese stereotypes, led to tension, defensive attitude, and misunderstandings.

Second, SA student participants' SLS experiences were significantly impacted by their intersecting identities and positionalities especially with local strangers. On the one hand, female and racially unmarked student participants from non-Western countries were denied the same level of access to SLS with local strangers outside of their regular SA habitat. This finding expands beyond the previously reported inequitable SA experiences of marginalized SA participants due to gender (Kinging, 2008, 2009; Diao 2016, Talburt & Stewart, 1999) and race (Any, 2017; Diao, 2020; Du, 2018; Goldoni, 2018) by adding an intersecting dimension of national identity. Indexing a racial and ethnic hierarchy that privileges white-presenting Westerners, the perception of Vietnamese female students Jayna and Zoey as potential scammers further echoes neo-racism (preference for students from the West) and neo-nationalism (preference for students from certain Asian countries over others) behind the unfair treatment of Asian students in a non-Western SA country uncovered by Lee and colleagues (2017).

On the other hand, analysis of Richard's and Frank's interviews shows that male and foreign-presenting international students faced tension when their inquiries into Chinese behavioral culture were misinterpreted as critiques and stereotypes from cultural outsiders. Race, manifested in foreign-looking physiques, intersecting with student participants' non-native Chinese proficiency and lacking in interview skills, contributed to cases of tension unpacked in the result section. Our findings align with Duff (2010), suggesting that discomfort experienced by SA participants may not solely stem from anxiety or immediate unfamiliarity with the new target discourse or practices, but rather from "the way newcomers' and their histories are viewed and positioned—by themselves, by others, and by institutions, as capable (or incapable), worthy, legitimate, showing potential for fuller participation or membership (or not), as insiders (or outsiders)" (Duff, 2010, p. 176).

Third, we identified a disconnection in the pedagogical design between L2 interview task and its broader SLS potential. Despite the good intention to socialize student participants into a Chinese inquiry discourse with members of the local community, a one-time language exercise with strangers with no expectations to develop a further relationship is not optimal for language

learners to participate in language socialization. Without proper reflection and structured mentoring to unpack what might have happened, participants were unable to fully benefit from the socialization opportunities the task offered, such as navigating the linguistic and sociocultural complexities inherent in authentic communication, especially when misunderstanding and communication breakdown happen. While the student participants perceived stress and tension when “forced” to socialize with unfamiliar “experts” such as local strangers, they often lacked the reflective tools and strategies needed to identify the sources of misunderstanding or develop strategies to overcome these challenges. Consequently, they failed to connect the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of the social interaction immediately, leaving them only superficially socialized into the practice of asking rehearsed interview and follow-up questions in Chinese.

To address this pedagogical gap, we propose that SA programs incorporate SL objectives into task design and provide explicit pedagogical guidelines to foster SLS practices and raise awareness. This approach would better equip learners to engage with the L2 community in a meaningful way, facilitating deeper socialization and promoting critical reflection on their experiences.

6. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

This study offers awareness-raising pedagogical implications for curriculum design in study abroad programs. First, to better leverage native-speaker peers as a program resource, structured peer-facilitation training should be implemented to reduce the risk of over-accommodation and ensure more equitable access to meaningful socializing opportunities for all learners. This training would guide peers to strike a balance between being supportive and maintaining communicative authenticity—encouraging them to gently prompt clarification, request elaboration, or point out communication breakdowns rather than preemptively resolving them. By framing their role not as teachers or helpers, but as curious interlocutors engaged in mutual meaning-making, native-speaker peers can foster more authentic inquiry-based interactions. Pairing learners with these trained peers in low-stakes interview rehearsals can equalize access to meaningful L2 practice while preparing students for less accommodating real-world interactions.

Second, to address the uneven access to SLS caused by intersecting identities such as race, gender, and national origin, SA language programs should incorporate critical intercultural reflection and identity negotiation

training into pre-departure and in-country orientations. This training should prepare students to recognize how their bodies, backgrounds, and perceived affiliations may shape interview interactions—positively or negatively—and equip them with strategies for navigating these dynamics. Facilitated discussions, case studies drawn from peer experiences, and role-play scenarios can help students anticipate potential challenges without internalizing blame and avoid oversimplified conclusions, such as assuming males are less accommodating in speech or foreign appearances are always advantageous. More importantly, programs should create structured opportunities for marginalized students to process and share their experiences, ensuring their perspectives shape future programming.

Third, an in-depth, guided post-task reflection process should be embedded into the curriculum as a critical pedagogical component to help students unpack complex SLS experiences. The findings suggest that students—especially those like Richard and Frank—may recognize moments of discomfort or communicative breakdown during their interactions with local strangers but struggle to diagnose the underlying causes without support. To address this, instructors can scaffold the reflection process through structured protocols that include close reading of interview transcripts alongside analytic prompts.

Specifically, students can be asked to revisit their recorded interviews and transcriptions with guiding questions that target three key levels:

- Discourse-level: What linguistic or pragmatic cues signaled tension or disengagement in the conversation? Were there shifts in tone, turn-taking, or topic management?
- Strategy-level: How did I attempt to keep the conversation going or clarify misunderstandings? Did I accommodate too much, push for meaning, or retreat too early?
- Content-level: What questions or topics may have triggered discomfort or misinterpretation? How might my positionality have influenced the way my questions were perceived?
- Pairing this analysis with peer debriefs and instructor-facilitated discussion can further deepen awareness. This reflective cycle not only helps students develop critical self-awareness but also promotes growth in intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic competence.

Finally, instructors need to be careful with the themes of the interviews. To foster cultural comparison and accommodate students' language proficiency,

foreign language textbooks often simplify complex societal phenomena, presenting stereotypical or biased situations, such as marital pressure for females in China or Chinese people's inclination to follow the crowd due to group consciousness. If students create interview questions around such topics without strategic planning, they are likely to encounter defensive responses that can derail the interview from the start. Instructors should be culturally sensitive towards students' interview scripts and instill the interview plan with strategies to avoid defensive responses.

In conclusion, this study bridged existing SLS and SA literature by illustrating the role of pedagogical interventions in language socialization during SA through discourse analysis. We problematize uncritical use of L2 interviews and reframe it from mere language exercise to analyzable socialization events. The findings of this study nuance the expectation of what constitutes a language socialization opportunity in the SA context. Rather than positioning the semi-structured L2 interview task as a guaranteed path to L2 development, our analysis reveals its value in exposing L2 learners to a spectrum of interactional dynamics with socializing potentials. The contrast between interactions with familiar peers and those with strangers in public spaces underscores the significance of augmenting SA programs and curriculum with SLS objectives, preparing SA participants for navigating genuine communicative challenges and unexpected cultural viewpoints, which were at times triggered by their intersecting identities, novice language and cultural skills, and emerging membership in the local community.

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Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Duke Kunshan University (Approval number: FWA00021580) on July 13, 2023.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study involve human participants and cannot be made publicly available due to privacy concerns..

CRedit author statement

Both authors equally participate in Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, formal analysis, Writing- Original draft preparation and Writing- Reviewing and Editing. Xin Zhang is also responsible for Funding Acquisition.

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Use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendix

Written reflection guides:

Use the following guides to reflect on and share your experience interviewing the Chinese peer at DKU and the Chinese stranger during the field trip. You can write your reflection in the Word document and then copy and paste your responses to the Qualtrics survey:

https://duke.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eJK1pGdS1G3zhZA

Q1: Can you tell us about who you are and your background in a few sentences?

Q2: Interviewing experience with Chinese peer:

- a. Please describe the Chinese peer you interviewed (e.g., age, gender, other demographic information that you think is relevant, how close you are with them)
- b. Please describe how you initiated the interview request, their response, and if you notice any salient reaction (e.g., linguistic, facial expressions, etc.) on the part of the Chinese peer when you requested to interview them?
- c. Please describe how the interview went and whether you think it was successful.
 - i. How did the interview make you feel?
 - ii. Can you share anything that went really well during the interview process? Why is that?
 - iii. Can you share anything that where challenging during the interview process? Why is that?

Q3: Interviewing experience with Chinese strangers from the street:

- d. Please describe the Chinese stranger you interviewed (e.g., age, gender, position, other demographic information that you think is relevant)
- e. Please describe how you initiated the interview request, their response, and if you notice any salient reaction (e.g., linguistic, facial expressions, etc.) on the part of the Chinese speaker on the street when you requested to interview them?
- f. Please describe how the interview went and whether you think it was successful.
 - i. How did the interview make you feel?

- ii. Can you share anything that went really well during the interview process?
Why is that?
- iii. Can you share anything that were challenging during the interview process?
Why is that?
Q4: Reflecting on the two interview experiences with a focus on how the attitude and reactions of the Chinese peers and the Chinese strangers you interviewed on the street:
- g. What do you think contributed to successful part of the intercultural experience?
- h. What do you think may have led to the challenges you encountered during the intercultural experience?
(Consider for example, gender, racio-ethnic identity, citizenship, language learning and intercultural experience, your relationship with the interviewees, Chinese language ability, personality, the task, the environment, etc.)

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