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Journaling about interaction: Metacognition around language learning

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ABSTRACT

Opportunities for interaction are not guaranteed in study abroad experiences, as they are premised upon fragile new language identities that are supported (or not) by a constellation of relationships, meaningful encounters, and a sense of belonging. This study focuses on a journaling activity added to a regularly occurring group meeting at a US university to engage international graduate students in conversational English. Through weekly journals and small group discussion, students reflect upon how context and interlocutors influence what they can do in a new language. Students were invited to consider both micro-contexts (situation-based) and macro-contexts (geopolitics, racialization) of their interactions, and explore interactional "successes" as well as breakdowns. Findings include increased awareness of the considerable burden for international students in engineering interactional "success," and the diversified, yet persistent tendency of native speaker ideology to influence learner perspectives.

Keywords
interaction,
study abroad,
journal studies,
Lx English users,
Chinese-speaking international students,
metacognition.

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Introduction

Study abroad in the US is seen as a context for progress in English language and culture goals largely due to increased opportunities for interaction. However, while there are more potential interlocutors in the target language (TL), interactional opportunities can actually be minimal and/or de-motivating to students for a variety of reasons that are often sourced in identity (Norton, 2000). A lack of meaningful opportunity for TL interaction is compounded with increased expectations for language progress during study abroad.

The current study focuses on select interactional episodes as recounted in a journaling activity with international graduate students at a private institution in the northeastern US. Participants regularly attended English Chats (pseudonym), groups that met for one hour on a weekly basis. These groups were led by a graduate student facilitator (the researcher) employed by the university language and intercultural resource center, hereafter referred to as the Center. A journaling activity was added to the weekly group conversations to increase awareness of language use through individual reflection and "pre-thinking" before sharing with the group. Any "interaction of interest" was valid for inclusion in the journals. The research questions are as follows:

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RQ1: Which features of interactions in English do international graduate students write about in their journals?

RQ2: Are there any patterns in the storytelling of these interactions across participants?

Through regular journals and small group discussion, international students reflect upon how context and interlocutors influence what they can do in a new language. This article focuses on what students observe about their interactional lives in English while studying abroad in the US and how they talk about specific episodes. The demographic profile of the participants influences the decision to focus the literature review on the experiences of degree-seeking Chinese international students in Anglophone countries. The majority of participants (five out of six) are ethnically Chinese, and the sixth participant is from Japan.

Literature Review

Chinese-speaking international students abroad

For language researchers, study abroad professionals, and university administrators, a more nuanced understanding of Chinese-speaking[1] international students' experiences at US universities is a priority. In 2022-2023, international students accounted for 5.6% of all university student enrollment in the US, with China as the leading country (27.4%), followed by India (25.4%), South Korea (4.1%), and Canada (2.6%). Graduate program enrollment increased by 21% in 2022-2023 academic year over the prior year, compared to a 0.9% increase for undergraduate enrollment (Institute of International Education, 2023).

Along with numbers, attitudes directed towards Chinese-speaking international students demonstrate how looking at specific groups within study abroad can yield insight. Silver et al. (2021) also report an increasingly challenging social climate in which students find themselves:

> "Yet, while the U.S. public generally welcomes international students, people are more divided when it comes specifically to Chinese students. A majority of Americans (55%) support limiting Chinese students studying in the U.S., including about one-in-five Americans who *strongly* support this idea. On the other hand, 43% oppose limitations on Chinese students, with 18% *strongly* opposed."

While public opinion is divided, it is important to note that the limitations referenced are specifically directed toward Chinese students—80% of Americans are favorable toward general international student enrollment at US universities (Silver et al., 2021).

The macro climate, though certainly not representative of all Chinese-speaking students' immediate environments, frames the challenges of English language development and opportunity for diverse and authentic interactions in the US. For Chinese-speaking students in particular, study abroad may be failing to deliver what it claims to offer. Yu and Moskal (2019) observed the following about their participants' UK study abroad experience: "…due to the overwhelming numbers of Chinese students…[they] lacked essential intercultural contact within the mono-cultural (Chinese) context, even though universities are—at least superficially—internationalising or becoming more multicultural" (p. 6). The authors also highlight how the field of study can influence interactional opportunity in English, noting that the popularity of business as a subject among Chinese students "deprived the students of opportunities to communicate cross-culturally" (2019, p. 2). In a study abroad program in Canada, Ranta and Meckelberg (2013) asked 17 Chinese students to estimate the number of minutes of English use per day. They found their participants' spoken English use was limited to about 11 minutes a day for their first six months abroad. Such limited use of the TL even in naturalistic study abroad settings is not unusual.

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[1] As some of the relevant literature includes students from Hong Kong and Taiwan, "Chinese-speaking" international students is a preferred term to support their inclusion without grouping them into an identity referring to students from mainland China.

Social networks and transnational habitus

This section will focus on the aspects of educational trajectories that are important in considering Chinese-speaking students as a subcategory within study abroad, and not simply referring to this group as a monolith. De Costa et al. (2016) examine the role of transnational habitus in the identity formation of one participant, Aaron. Having moved to the US for high school, Aaron tended to resent a Lx (additional language) English identity while at university. As he populated his social circle almost exclusively with Chinese students, an international Chinese student identity was not problematic for him. However, grouping him with other Chinese students in the university ESL program in which he was placed (prior to matriculating as a degree student) failed to recognize how he associated with a different group of Chinese students—those who had gone to high school in the US. For Aaron, the identity of an ESL Chinese student at university effectively erased his three years at a US high school, time that he invested in cultural and linguistic acclimation.

Assumptions about Chinese-speaking students' social relations ignore the concept of transnational habitus, thus excluding meaningful experiences that may strongly contribute to Chinese-speaking students' identities. De Costa et al. (2016) call upon Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus as describing "dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures…that shape current practices and structures" (p. 175). When considering the transnational identities of highly mobile international students, particularly those with access to capital or resources, Darvin and Norton (2015) also invoke the concept of transnational habitus. Such a concept is a useful frame for describing Aaron in the following way:

> "What is striking…is how his former high school, a disembodied institution, continues to be a social nexus for Aaron and his friends even after they have left Pittsburgh. In keeping with the notion of transnational habitus, their continuing friendship underscores how globally mobile individuals like them are able to preserve social ties even though they no longer share a rooted and common physical space (their Pittsburgh high school)" (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 188).

When Chinese-speaking students' identities are constructed around Current Place + China, and all discourse goes between these two named places, large swaths of life and formative experiences can go unnoticed. In Aaron's case, where high school years were particularly meaningful in informing his present social affiliations and even sense of home, his identity as a Chinese student in the US is situated in multiple regions that resist a dichotomous construction of "here" and "there." Yet even as Chinese-speaking students have been regarded as a "distinct migrant group" specifically for their transnational characteristics (Gu, 2015, p.

64), their worlds are still widely regarded as dual. This dual life does not serve to support a nuanced approach to Chinese-speaking students and their transnational activities.

This duality can invoke expectations back home that exert even more pressure on students to succeed in ways that surpass any sense of personal actualization or success in the host society context. Branded as an overseas student, "people in China will have higher expectations on your English proficiency…it is the fear that pushes me to study harder" (Yu et al., 2018, p. 132). In fact, fear is a recurrent theme in Yu et al.'s (2018) analysis that uses Dörnyei's (2009) L2 selves framework, specifically, the dreaded L2 self as a dominant source of motivation: "I fear that if my English were poor, while going back to China others would laugh at me" (Yu et al., 2018, p. 131). These expectations invoke a stereotyped image of study abroad (i.e., the "given" of interactional opportunities and associated "natural" increase in proficiency) and not the reality that there may be "hundreds of Chinese students seated together in the classroom" (Yu & Moskal, 2019, p. 5).

Native speaker ideology

In the construction of Lx English identities, Chinese-speaking students often invoke native speaker ideology as a reference for guiding their study abroad expectations. Such ideology assumes "that the primary reason for learning a foreign language is to communicate with native speakers of that language" (Newbold, 2021, p. 394), not reflective of the reality of English as a lingua franca among Lx English speakers, as many students experience in their university contexts abroad. As the popularity of English-medium programs expands beyond traditional Anglophone study abroad destinations, student attitudes are also beginning to shift, evident in the literature through some students' reconceptualization of the relationship between proficiency and language use. In a qualitative study by Cai et al. (2022), 10 students who returned to China after 3-10 months of university study in the US, Canada, Ireland, and the UK shared their experiences abroad through interviews. They spoke of their ability to join class discussion and share their ideas "regardless of their English proficiency level" (p. 6). Other students found themselves motivated by a focus on language for communication, as "the atmosphere in Canada is that everyone just asked if they didn't understand" (p. 6).

Critical to how participants viewed proficiency was the eroding premium placed on accents. Cai et al.'s (2022) participants contrasted how accent was approached while learning English in China and when learning abroad:

> "…in Canada…people will not criticise your accent; it mattered what you could actually express. But after I went abroad, I found that people, including teachers, had different accents, so they didn't care about accents. I started to realise that communication is the goal instead of imitating certain accents" (p. 6).

Benson et al.'s (2012) Hong Kong students are similarly able to shift their views away from native-speakerist goals, as teachers support their accents as "actually part of our identity" (p. 185), helping students begin to consider themselves as "users" instead of "learners" of English. Ye and Edwards' (2017) Chinese PhD students, working as teaching assistants in the UK, similarly accessed legitimacy in their identities as English speakers. In situations where a breakdown in communication occurred, instead of invoking a power dynamic between native/non-native speakers, one participant negotiated his positioning as an academically competent legitimate speaker of English: “If they do not understand, there are surely two possibilities: either because my pronunciation is not very good, or I need to rephrase the sentence” (p. 870). By examining the site of misunderstanding, the teaching assistant reviewed his options for repair that made successful interactions attainable.

Other students specifically cited Chinese language skills as a source of confidence and a positive nexus of identity. In Barkhuizen’s (2017) study with Hong Kong students who returned from New Zealand, one focal participant, Max, did not have a strong affiliation with Cantonese nor Chinese ethnicity at the beginning of his study abroad period but developed pride in Chinese language skills and greater belonging to his native Hong Kong during the first year (p. 105). He was even able to find work at a local Chinese radio station as a DJ while in Auckland, a position that suited his outgoing personality, academic major (media studies), and love for English-language media.

The current study

Focusing specifically on Chinese-speaking students within the greater international student population is particularly relevant for the demographic profile of the current study. From Fall 2021 numbers published by the host university’s Office of International Education, China remained the most prominent sending country for international students overall as well as for each level of study (undergraduate, master’s, doctoral). Out of the university’s over 5,600 international students, 2,891 came from China. International education research has found that international students who attend universities with high numbers of those sharing their same nationality experience greater challenges with English (Zhou & Todman, 2009). Such an environment influences the provision of and participation in groups such as English Chats, the setting of this study.

English Chats are one of many offerings by the Center, free of charge and voluntary. While registration is open to all international students at the university, over 90% of registrants are graduate students. This may be due to the intensity of residential life and academic programming for undergraduate students, as well as undergraduate-specific opportunities that parallel the English Chats offering. The literature also reflects a fault line between undergraduate and master’s level international students (see Anderson, 2019), often drawing upon significant differences in social class, family financial situation, and future plans. Moreover, the majority of attendees are Chinese. This reflects demographic trends at the host university as a whole. Chats are casual in nature, held in a spacious academic classroom in a central location on campus, and are usually attended by 2-6 students each time. Facilitators can begin Chats with specific language or cultural themes, but conversation typically follows participant interests and questions. For the study, an online journaling component was added to create more opportunities for participants to reflect upon their interactions throughout the week.

Methodology

Participants

In the beginning of the spring semester, an announcement was sent out from the language and culture resource center to all those subscribed to its listserv. The registration form to participate included the following text:

> These groups are designed to give you the opportunity to practice speaking English in a fun and casual environment, discuss language and culture, and connect with other graduate students from different programs at [University name].
>
> The regular group meetings center around a particular topic that gives us a chance to talk informally and hear different cultural perspectives. We also have social events throughout the semester where all the group members can come together to hang out and participate in various activities. In the past, we have held game nights, trivia nights, picnics, and a tour of one of the VR labs on campus.
>
> If you are interested in being a part of one of these groups, please fill out the survey below so that we can place you in a group. We will do our best to fit everyone into a group time that works for them, but please understand that we might not be able to accommodate everyone's schedules. We try to keep the groups small so that you have lots of time to speak. This semester, our groups will meet in person every week.
>
> We hope that these groups are a chance to learn something new but most importantly we hope you are able to build friendships and have fun with other international students and your group facilitator!

Students were placed in groups on a first-come, first-served basis. For Spring 2023 when the study took place, there were 10 Chats, and 8-12 students registered for each group. The meeting time was set by each facilitator, and participants were matched to groups based on the alignment of their availability with the offered groups. Each group took place at a different time during the week in order to expand the opportunities to join.

Before beginning the study, the protocol was approved by the researcher’s institutional research board. All ethical guidelines required by regional and institutional specifications were adhered to, and voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all who participated. The researcher was the facilitator for two Chats and presented the study opportunity in the last 10 minutes of the first meetings. To avoid creating social pressure to consent, all attendees received templates of the instruments (paper versions of the interaction journal and language learner autobiography prompt) while hearing about the study but received the consent forms as the meeting finished. Attendees were given the option to take the form home to read over and decide on participation later. Google Drive folders for each participant were created and shared between the researcher and the participant, and a blank interaction journal template and language learner autobiography document placed in each folder.

Seven participants across the two groups consented and filled out at least one journal; this article includes six participants’ (see Table 1) journal/interview contributions, selected based upon relevance of excerpts to main themes. All participants were international graduate students studying full-time.

Table 1. *Participants*

Participant (pseudonym)	*Level of study*	*Program of study*	*Home country*	*Journals completed*
Kelly	Master’s	Design	China	4
Andrew	Master’s	Electrical and computer engineering	China	4
Zhiyuan	Master’s	Educational technology	China	4
Xinyi	Master’s	Culture management	China	3

Jiahui	Master’s	Design	China	1
Kazu	Master’s	MBA	Japan	1

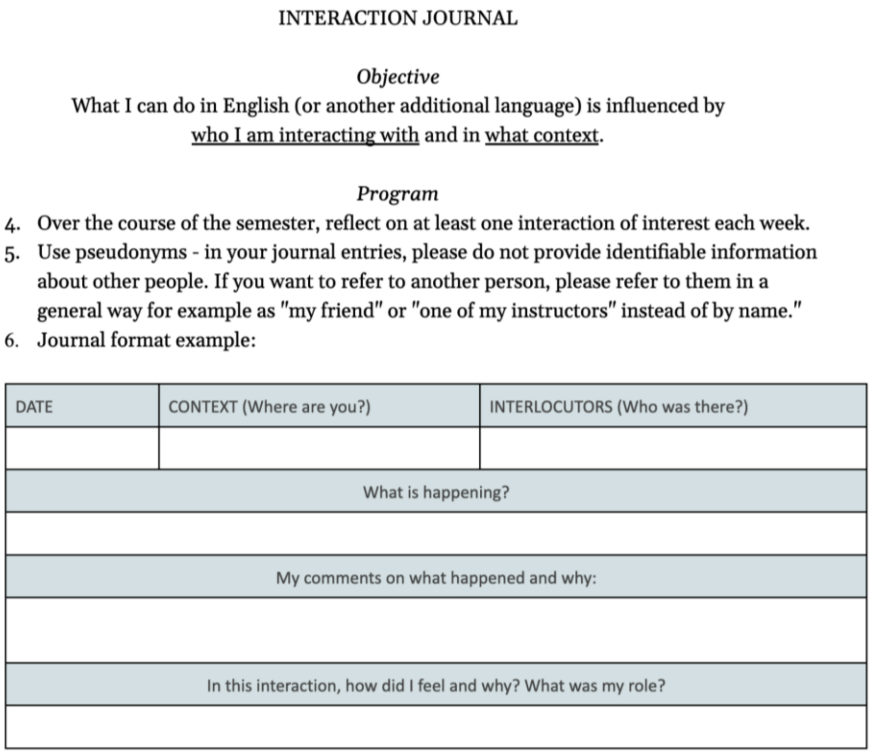
Tasks

All tasks are shown in Table 2. The journal task was given to all Chat attendees, including those who did not participate in the study.

Table 2. *Data collection tasks and timeline*

Instrument	*Modality*	*Administration*
Language learner autobiography or qualitative interview	Google document or face-to-face	Week 1
Weekly interaction journal entries	Google document	Weekly (Weeks 2-11)
Group meeting recording	Audio recording of one group meeting	Week 10, 11, or 12
Researcher notes from group discussion participant observation	Weekly conversation group	Weekly (Weeks 1-12)

The instructions for the journal task were provided as follows:



INTERACTION JOURNAL

Objective
What I can do in English (or another additional language) is influenced by
who I am interacting with and in what context.

Program

4. Over the course of the semester, reflect on at least one interaction of interest each week.
5. Use pseudonyms - in your journal entries, please do not provide identifiable information about other people. If you want to refer to another person, please refer to them in a general way for example as "my friend" or "one of my instructors" instead of by name."
6. Journal format example:

DATE	CONTEXT (Where are you?)	INTERLOCUTORS (Who was there?)
What is happening?		
My comments on what happened and why:		
In this interaction, how did I feel and why? What was my role?		

Figure 1. *Journal template*

Positionality statement

I approached this study with multiple motivations. From personal experiences as an international student in China, Taiwan, Italy, and Türkiye, I cannot downplay the difficulties of expanding our interactions beyond networks of compatriots and other international students. It is with this sensitivity that I seek out involvement with language and cultural support in the communities I join. Serving as a Chats facilitator was thus a natural fit for me to fulfill the teaching/project portion of my graduate student fellowship during the data collection period.

I presented myself as a peer to the Chats attendees. This self-positioning included sharing personal struggles in interaction while a student at our university and in our city, as well as drawing connections among our respective international student experiences. Chats attendees were both master's and PhD students, with spouses and children present in our city, spouses in another part of the US or in home countries, or single. I openly shared about my own family situation, as the interaction patterns of graduate students tend to be strongly mediated through familial factors such as the age of children.

Being Asian-American, I am not agnostic to the curious tension regarding my ethnic heritage and disclosed early on my background and intermediate Mandarin Chinese proficiency level. When asking attendees where they are from, I specified to share the city and not only the country (e.g., "I am from Chengdu, China" instead of "I am from China."). I double-checked with attendees that I was pronouncing their names correctly.

Such pragmatic and identity positioning work is not hidden, nor exclusive to staff with phenotypes that overlap with the majority of our clientele. On the contrary, the Center that sponsors the Chats is explicit about a non-deficit narrative guiding the curation of services offered. Our clients are thus not defined by lacking English skills but are contextualized by their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. Similarly, there is no implicit standard of "nativeness" that acts as a gatekeeper for staff qualifications nor for intended outcomes of services. Rather, multilingual backgrounds for staff increase the quality of our services and the holistic perspective with which we approach our work. Consistent with this commitment is a diverse staff including both domestic and international students.

Analysis

Participant journals were examined in three stages. Following the recommendations of Brinkmann (2013) and Dörnyei (2007), during the first phase of coding eleven themes emerged, and interlocutor type, setting, interactional context, and affect were noted. During a second round of coding, the eleven themes condensed into five subthemes. We can look at one participant's journal as an illustration of the process:

> *"What is happening?*
>
> I watched a short video which is made by a English teacher from China. She said that most native English speakers tend to communicate with international students in a low level way naturally, so that the students could understand easily.
>
> *My comments on what happened and why:*
>
> I think yes, native speakers are friendly to our international students. But at the same time, I think it's better to learn more by ourselves before talking to native speakers haha!
>
> *In this interaction, how did I feel and why? What was my role?*
>
> I feel there is a long way to go if I want to communicate well with native speakers."

Excerpt 1. *Example journal entry*

This was an entry that was paired with a second entry in the same week, where the participant attended a local hockey game with another Chinese international student. In the initial phase, this entry was coded with two themes: 1) positive Lx English-Lx English speaker interaction, and 2) metacognition with language identity. In the second phase of coding, the entry was included under the umbrella theme of metacognition. While each entry can have multiple categorizations, after the entries from all participants were reviewed for umbrella themes and patterns, the most frequently occurring themes for each entry were retained. A weakness in this process is that umbrella themes may obscure more fine-grained phenomena. To support data interpretation, however, insights from group meeting conversations and participant feedback to other participant contributions are also drawn upon.

Results

RQ1: Relevant themes

Across 22 journal entries written by seven participants over a span of nine weeks, five themes emerged (see Table 3), with some journal entries containing multiple themes. The first research question asks:

> RQ1: Which features of interactions in English do international graduate students write about in their journals?

Most of the interactions occurred in unstructured free time and academic situations across a variety of interactional contexts. See Table 3 for counts**.** The most and least represented interactional settings may emphasize a feature of this specific population of graduate students. Noticeably, only one journal entry focuses on an interaction that occurred in an extracurricular activity context.

Table 3. *Interactional settings*

Interactional setting (general)	Interactional setting (specific)	Number of entries
Unstructured free time		10
	Social media	3
	Cultural/leisure local	2
	Service encounter	4
	Random (stranger) encounter	1
Academic		10
	Before/after class	3
	Program-related meeting	7
Extracurricular activity		1
	University-affiliated	1
Professional		1
	Job-seeking activities	1

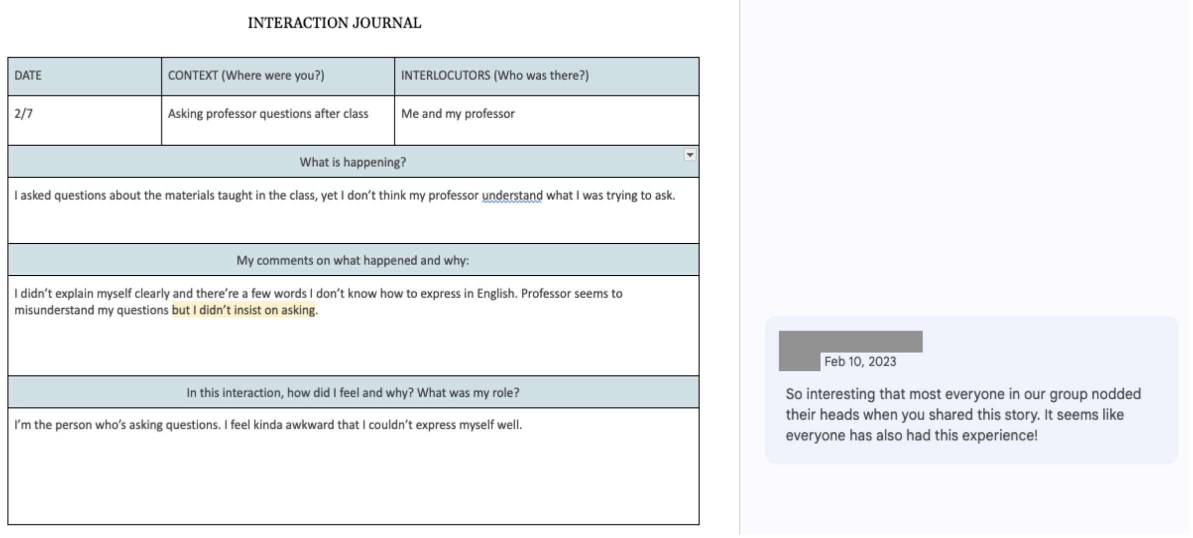
While the participants in this study were not formally surveyed regarding all their extracurricular involvements, clubs/activities were not frequently mentioned during group meetings, and so their lack of representation in the journals likely reflects participants' minimal involvement. This finding could be surprising given both institutional and participant narratives in describing the purposes of creating and attending extracurricular programming. For example, the host institution's student affairs website homepage displays: "Meet new people. Have fun. Share your talents. Contribute to the community. Make an impact. Design your unique [university] experience." Moreover, study abroad literature also supports extracurricular involvement, linking it to greater gains in language proficiency (Fraser, 2002; Whitworth, 2006). Yet the scope of study abroad research is broad, and graduate students in degree-granting programs in a highly-ranked US university are a specific population best contextualized within a subset of the literature (see Yu & Moskal, 2019). The academic setting contained the single most represented context: program-related meetings. Such meetings included labs, project work, and lectures sponsored by students' academic programs. As these activities are required, it is unsurprising that they are more represented across participants. The features of these kinds of settings present an interesting interactional opportunity. While involving the same interlocutors as regular class meetings, settings in which interactional opportunities may not be available (e.g., lectures), program-related meetings tend to be less structured, with the need to engage in multiple conversation-based tasks (e.g., negotiation, small talk, event planning). Participants may engage in formal registers with their professors and visiting academics, as well as informal registers with their classmates and also professors. The frequency and intensity of academic program-related meetings will vary among disciplines but are generally a feature of graduate programs at research-based institutions such as the host university. As described in the analysis section, the sub-themes that emerged were grouped under five categories:

Table 4. *Themes and sub-themes*

Larger theme	*Sub-theme*	*Count*
Metacognition		11
	Language identity	3
	Language learning process	8
Misunderstanding		4
	Participant felt that they did not understand	3
	Participant felt misunderstood (interlocutor did not understand)	1
Missing information		4
	Missing vocabulary word	2
	Missing cultural knowledge	2
Cultural difference		4
	Appreciation of cultural difference	3
	Tension	4

NS ideology		3
	NNS Community	1
	Deficiency of being NNS	2

All participants chose to record interactions where they felt their Lx English use was inadequate. The situations range from not understanding, cross-cultural difference, inability to initiate a satisfactory repair, and lack of confidence in creativity in a Lx. While the limited number of journal entries does not support analysis along a time continuum, for one participant there was development over parallel interactions. In Andrew's first interaction, he asked his professor a question after class, didn't understand the answer, and walked away from the conversation without the information he had asked for. In Andrew's second interaction, his lab partner said something in a strange voice, and Andrew asked why he used a strange voice. It turned out that the lab partner had been quoting a meme that was circulating on social media, and Andrew didn't recognize it because he consumes social media in Chinese and not English. Screenshots of the journals with my comments are included below:



INTERACTION JOURNAL

DATE	CONTEXT (Where were you?)	INTERLOCUTORS (Who was there?)
2/7	Asking professor questions after class	Me and my professor

What is happening?

I asked questions about the materials taught in the class, yet I don't think my professor understand what I was trying to ask.

My comments on what happened and why:

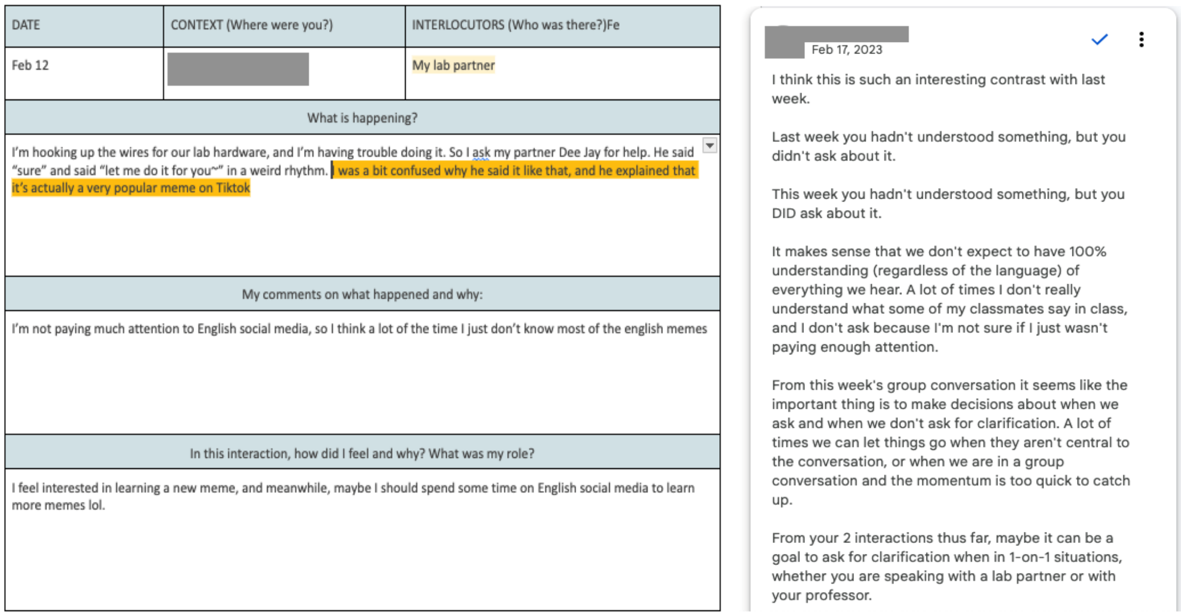
I didn't explain myself clearly and there're a few words I don't know how to express in English. Professor seems to misunderstand my questions but I didn't insist on asking.

In this interaction, how did I feel and why? What was my role?

I'm the person who's asking questions. I feel kinda awkward that I couldn't express myself well.

[redacted] Feb 10, 2023

So interesting that most everyone in our group nodded their heads when you shared this story. It seems like everyone has also had this experience!



DATE	CONTEXT (Where were you?)	INTERLOCUTORS (Who was there?)Fe
Feb 12	[redacted]	My lab partner

What is happening?

I'm hooking up the wires for our lab hardware, and I'm having trouble doing it. So I ask my partner Dee Jay for help. He said "sure" and said "let me do it for you~" in a weird rhythm. I was a bit confused why he said it like that, and he explained that it's actually a very popular meme on Tiktok

My comments on what happened and why:

I'm not paying much attention to English social media, so I think a lot of the time I just don't know most of the english memes

In this interaction, how did I feel and why? What was my role?

I feel interested in learning a new meme, and meanwhile, maybe I should spend some time on English social media to learn more memes lol.

[redacted] Feb 17, 2023

I think this is such an interesting contrast with last week.

Last week you hadn't understood something, but you didn't ask about it.

This week you hadn't understood something, but you DID ask about it.

It makes sense that we don't expect to have 100% understanding (regardless of the language) of everything we hear. A lot of times I don't really understand what some of my classmates say in class, and I don't ask because I'm not sure if I just wasn't paying enough attention.

From this week's group conversation it seems like the important thing is to make decisions about when we ask and when we don't ask for clarification. A lot of times we can let things go when they aren't central to the conversation, or when we are in a group conversation and the momentum is too quick to catch up.

From your 2 interactions thus far, maybe it can be a goal to ask for clarification when in 1-on-1 situations, whether you are speaking with a lab partner or with your professor.

Figure 2. *Screenshots from Andrew's journal*

Native speaker ideology

Across participants, there have been themes of native speaker ideology. Some participants have written about interactions with monolingual English speakers where small talk fades out after a few moments, or where participants have been approached by solicitors or student groups and are unable to extract themselves from the conversation. When we discuss these episodes in the weekly group meeting, other participants recognize such experiences as familiar, and express having similar reactions/roles. Importantly, participants attribute deficits in these interactions as due to their status as Lx speakers of English; in other words, they are responsible for any negative feature in the interaction. In group meetings, when we discussed how participants would have acted had they been speaking their L1, they guess that interactions would have been more positive.

Oftentimes assumptions invoking native speaker ideology go unverbalized. An example of when this assumption becomes explicit is during an interview with Zhiyuan, an educational technology master's student from China, in which I ask him about English friendships outside of academic contexts (full transcript following conversation analysis conventions in Appendix 3):

Interviewer: Do you feel, that you have like a regular friendship in which, you are speaking English, with just like purely social reasons? Like not so much academic. So like not like a group project so much but have you made those friendships?
Zhiyuan: Uh honestly…you mean some friendship with native speakers right?

I further explained my question by supplying "other international students" as a potential interaction in which the primary language spoken is English. The interview went on to reveal an artificiality to my suggestion of a social category outside of academic contexts, as all of Zhiyuan's social interactions were in some way mediated by academic purposes.

Native speaker ideology will be discussed further under the next RQ.

RQ2: Are there any patterns in the storytelling of these interactions across participants?

We now turn to RQ2 and focus on metacognition, the theme that showed up in roughly half of the journal entries (n=11). Instances of metacognition included a) language identity and b) the language learning process. Affective descriptions associated with these interactions included happy, weird, interested, confused, empathetic, nervous, shy, stressed, regretful, and passive. Participants approached these journals recounting learning strategies, reflecting on features of language, noticing attitudes towards non-standard accents, as well as commenting on conversational type ("it was a common conversation," wrote one participant).

Metacognition can be a particularly salient learning device for advanced speakers of English as an additional language. As the most recent Lx experience may have been distant, e.g., a high school class in which English grammar or one of the four skills was the target object of learning, a peer learning community and access to resources that come with active or formal language learning may not be available for advanced speakers. Such is often the case with Chinese international students, a topic returned to later in this section. When metacognitive comments describe negative situations, participant observations centered around a mismatch between expectations and reality. These expectations are often rooted in the home context, referencing back to the home culture or national context. Take the following examples:

> Andrew: I learned from primary school that “how are you”, “how’s it going” is typical greeting questions and people who ask are not expecting an actual response, but I’m still not sure if I should respond something or could I just say nothing…I feel a bit weird he asks this question every time, cause we don’t have such a way to greet people in Chinese culture and my other American friends also don’t do it.
>
> Jiahui: One little regret I had is I was passive to express. In East Asia it is “good” to be modest, so I feel comfortable not talking much to strangers, but maybe it is different from what people in the US expect for a social scenario.
>
> Kazu: I recognized again there is quite larger “gap” between ESL and Native English, but Casino chould be a good place to learn the real English (with caution)

Andrew’s comment describes his continued frustration with greetings, despite abundant exposure to this conversational practice, having attended four years of undergraduate and one semester of graduate school in the US. Drawing upon both a Chinese cultural frame of reference and other American friends as reference points, Andrew writes about this interaction as he is “still not sure” about the desired response; this style of greeting, while taught in textbooks, continues to feel strange in real-life contexts.

Drawing upon De Costa et al.’s (2016) invocation of *transnational habitus,* it bears mentioning here that Andrew is the only participant who moved to the US for undergraduate education. This identity, distinct from the others in the group, may be indexed in the journal excerpt above through the use of “**still** not sure” (bolding of text my own), indicating the longevity of tension, and “American friends,” which no other participant claims to have. In two other journals Andrew’s interlocutors are also American friends, a social resource not present in others’ narratives.

The interaction above contributed by Jiahui, a design master’s student from mainland China, is a one-time conversation with someone tabling in the student center. Jiahui’s inability to extract herself from the conversation led her to reflect on cultural differences in interaction, specifically when encountering strangers. Her cultural frame of reference informed her passive stance (participant’s own interpretation), but her interlocutor seemed to be following a different cultural script, and so Jiahui looked beyond language skills into cultural dispositions as primarily influencing the interaction.

Kazu, an MBA student from Japan, intrepidly ventured out to a local casino on the weekend, as he identified three factors that created a positive learning-in-the-wild environment there: 1) There is a dealer at every table, whose task is to create conversation among the players, 2) Most people are drinking alcohol, contributing to a more casual environment where people are quicker to speak with other players, and 3) Players are relaxed, pursuing a leisure activity during their free time. While these conditions did indeed create the conversational English environment he was expecting, unfortunately, beyond the initial exchange of niceties, Kazu found continuing his own participation in these interactions inaccessible due to the tendency of "native speakers" to abbreviate their words. "I couldn't understand what they were talking!!!" he wrote.

When metacognition tended toward the positive, it was hedged either by negative ideologies or negative contexts. Taking another look at Excerpt 1 as briefly introduced in the methods section, Kelly wrote in response to a video she watched:

> I watched a short video which is made by a English teacher from China. She said that most native English speakers tend to communicate with international students in a low level way naturally, so that the students could understand easily.
>
> I think yes, native speakers are friendly to our international students. But at the same time, I think it's better to learn more by ourselves before talking to native speakers haha! I feel there is a long way to go if I want to communicate well with native speakers.

What was overall a positive journal entry, recounting a local excursion with a friend, was paired with a high-level observation about the value of a community of Lx speakers. Yet the value of Lx-Lx interaction as scaffolding seems to be just that—limited to a learning context. Even with a language with obvious lingua franca status and utility as English, study abroad ideology that suggests sounding like "native speakers" as the unspoken communicative goal continues to frame Lx-Lx speaking opportunities as inferior.

There is a divergent yet overlapping theme of native speaker ideology acknowledged by Xinyi, a master's student in her second year of an arts management program. Though she exhibited metacognitive awareness regarding the baseless implications of accentedness, she ultimately recognized that she was still subject to others' judgments that confound accentedness with proficiency. In her journal describing a podcast interview she and her project team conducted, she made connections to her own experience back home (bolded text my own emphasis):

> [Our interviewee] is raised in a Filipino immigrant family and she talked about her life growing up in an immigrant family. She talked about her mother tried to hide her own accent and learned how to speak in an 'American' way so that people won't recognize where she originally came from.
>
> I am related to that in some ways even though I don't feel 'embarrassed' that I have an accent. However, this is a prevalent phenomenon in non-English speaking countries, where people are always judged by others because they don't have an 'authentic' English accent (american or british accent). Lots of people around me tried so hard to correct it because it is a criterion to measure whether their English is good. Having a strong accent equals 'poor English', which always makes English learners feel stressed and embarrassed.
>
> Back in China, no one had ever judged me because my accent was not that strong. I was LUCKY but **I do feel worried even though I can communicate in English and use English in a working environment.** But I hope more and more people realize having accents is normal, it is a cultural identity. We have so many kinds of accents around the world and accent is the least important thing in communication.

I followed up with Xinyi using the comments feature in the Google document, asking how she was able to break away from toxic ideologies regarding accentedness. She shared with me how as she advanced in her studies and had to discuss increasingly specialized content in English, linguistic features other than accent, such as grammar and vocabulary, became much more important in effective communication. "Ironically, people with a relatively low acquisition of

English are the majority who love to judge other people's English, because the accent is the only thing they can judge :(," Xinyi wrote.

Finally, the pernicious effects of native speaker ideology manifest in shifting certain interactional burdens onto the Lx English speaker. In Jiahui's journal entry where she encountered proselytizing Alice in the university student center, she also wrote about proselytizing Bob, who was tabling with Alice:

> Today on my way home from the lab, I encountered a group of people advertising an event they hold. Alice, who I didn't know before greets me and we have some conversations about the event and self introduction. After a while, she introduced me to Bob. Bob also participated in the event. He learned some Mandarin and he tried to talk with me in Mandarin, but I replied to him in English.
>
> I was not very interested in the event, but Alice is very good at talking and bringing the relationship closer, so I just let the conversation go on. I found it not easy to quit a conversation when I speak English. It is partially because I'm shy. I was wondering, is it related to the way I learned English? Maybe I somehow treat it in a "listen and response" way, like taking a speaking test when you just want everything to go smoothly. Rather than expressing myself.
>
> Bob can speak Mandarin and he tried to speak. But when he talked to me, I was still in the mode of English conversation, and I'm not sure how much Mandarin does Alice know so I replied in English. Also, I feel a little stressed if I speak Mandarin, my accent or some word I use will make it hard to understand for non-native speakers.

Jiahui displayed a sensitivity to be accommodating to Lx speakers, in this case Lx speakers of Mandarin Chinese. In noticeable juxtaposition with Kelly's observation above, Kazu's casino outing, and many other similar interactions categorized as misunderstandings in the data, speaker accommodation has usually been a burden of the Lx speaker. In this episode, Jiahui felt a double burden, as a Lx listener of English, acutely aware of her inability to leave the English interaction that was dominated by Alice, and as a L1 speaker of Mandarin Chinese, unsure about how to accommodate Lx speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Even when the interlocutors offered flexibility in mixing languages and speaking in a language that had the potential to be more comfortable for Jiahui and shift power differentials, Jiahui perceived this opportunity as one that generated stress.

Conclusion

This article explored a journaling activity in a semester-long conversational English Chats group meeting. Fieldnotes were taken during all of the weekly in-person group meetings, and participants shared their journal entries with the group, receiving feedback and follow-up questions from the researcher/facilitator and other participants. The research questions focused on the journal content, seeking to understand what participants noticed about their interactions and chose to write down (RQ1), as well as the narrative manner in which they recounted each interactional episode (RQ2). For RQ1, participants' entries focused on five themes: Misunderstanding, native speaker ideology, cultural difference, metacognition, and missing information. The most frequently occurring theme was metacognition, which included both metacognition about language learning as well as language identity. For RQ2, participants attended to episodes where their expectations did not match their actual experiences. To inform their expectations, they largely drew upon socio-cultural frames from home contexts which were institutionally-based (e.g., “we learn this in school” and “we are taught this”). These frames acted as a reference point to interpret the interactions that they chose to write down, interactions which were largely negative in nature. When interactions of interest had positive elements in them, participants still drew upon deficit ideologies (e.g., native speaker ideology) to recount what happened.

Studies that include a journaling component are often conducted in action research approaches, where the researcher-instructor assigns a journaling activity for credit or as part of the requirements for a course. An important difference of this study lies in the voluntary nature of involvement. Weekly group attendance, and all elements of involvement in the study were voluntary. All of the participants were graduate students who were balancing full course loads and academic program requirements such as lab meetings, internships, and semester-long projects. Some also had families with young children. The composition of the groups was also dynamic, as some attendees (in the groups and in the study) stopped coming to meetings during the semester, and new group members also joined. These factors make the context of this study not readily comparable to journaling activities as assigned in classrooms, settings which typically remain intact and require the journaling assignment throughout the semester.

Although the literature does not yet offer a robust subfield of similar contexts for comparison, the novelty of this project’s design offers an exploration of a stated goal of journaling: the development of learner autonomy. Through the act of writing journal entries, language learners are engaging in “applied metacognition” (Hacker et al., 2009) which is central to self-regulated, or autonomous learning (Dignath & Büttner, 2008). As journaling activities are designed with the goal of fostering “intentional noticing” (Lomicka & Ducate, 2021), it is not surprising that participants questioned their assumptions about language learning and language identity while studying abroad in the US.

Finally, this study’s design may be of interest to similar university language and intercultural centers, as many international students who enroll in graduate programs in Anglophone countries seek out institutionally-sponsored resources to support their interactional opportunities in English. Centers can incorporate programming that explicitly supports the development of student metacognition regarding interaction. For example, instead of a “small talk” workshop where facilitators offer instruction and participants practice chunked phrases, students can submit small talk episodes from “the wild” and debrief together the different interactional positionings and assumptions that are co-created during the course of the conversation.

Furthermore, the prominence of academic program-related contexts in providing diverse interactional opportunities can be a resource capitalized upon by both university departments and support centers. For example, centers can create programming that encourages students to develop a Lx English voice that feels authentic even across different registers (e.g., speaking with faculty in class, office hours, conferences, project/paper collaborations, social meals/events, etc.). Departments can consider allocating more funding to academic activities promoting social interactions for students and constituents. As international students are accessing a significant portion of their interactions through academic program-related activities, these contexts can receive more attention both from a programming and a research perspective.

In conclusion, a central tenet of the promise of study abroad is that of *interaction*, yet the scaffolding through which meaningful and supportive interactional episodes become accessible is somehow not packaged in the promise. These international students, users and speakers of their target language for most of their lives, are autonomous learners. They have a key role in seeking out, noticing, reflecting upon, and making changes to their language proficiencies in line with their personal goals. Although limited in scope, the participants' own interest and sophistication in reflecting upon and discussing their interactions highlight an important resource in designing language and intercultural programming—participants' own metacognition. Voluntary attendance and voluntary participation in a project such as in the current study can be sustained as a primary feature of future projects investigating similar questions.

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Appendix 1. Interlocutor type by theme

Larger theme	Interlocutor	Count
Misunderstanding		4
	Professor	3
	Classmate	1
NS ideology		2
	Online English instructor	1
	Stranger	1
Cultural difference		9
	Classmate	4
	Stranger	4
	Academic affiliate	1
Metacognition		9
	Friend	2
	Classmate	2
	Academic affiliate	3
	Stranger	2
Missing information		6
	Service personnel	1
	Classmate	2
	Friend	1
	Academic affiliate	1
	Stranger	1

Appendix 2. Interview with Zhiyuan

```
Interviewer:but u:m. .hh thinking o:f now? now youre here.
Zhiyuan:    mhmm
Int.:       .hh do you feel, that you have um. #u:h# (.)
            like a regular friend#ship#. in which, #auhmm#
            you are speaking English, >with just like< purely social (.)
            #uhm# (.) reasons. like >not so much< academic.
            >so like not like a< a group project so much but. #um#
            have you made those like friendships? .h
Zhiyuan:    hh uh hh. (3.0) uh::. honestly:::¿ (2.0) umm. (1.5) cause
            I feel like my conversation with:: uh:: you mea:n uh
            some friendship with (.) °native speakers°¿ °right°
Int.:       OR LIKE .h like (.) .h other international students too.
            >I guess↑ just like< a friendship in which (.)
            you DO speak English. ma[ybe its like even
Zhiyuan:                            [uhu:h
Int.:       a a group of THREE people, but because english is the the
Zhiyuan:    a:[::hyeah
Int.:         [common language among
            like hohow are those. (.) yeah, like friendships:
            or interactions
Zhiyuan:    .h (1.0) u::h I think they are mixed together,
Int.:       o[kay.
Zhiyuan:     [and its for social activity and aca[demic activities
Int.:                                             [okay.
Zhiyuan:    are mixed together. because I (.) I:::uhr I make a lot of
            friends within my cohort
Int.:       yeah.
Zhiyuan:    and also in other courses I take, and you know we (.)
            we had a social activities [during
Int.:                                  [mhm]
Zhiyuan:    that courses¿ maybe we eat out together¿
Int.:       mhm mhm
Zhiyuan:    and but during eating out we also talk about our group[project.
Int.:                                                             [mm. mm.
Zhiyuan:    so °such kind of° such kind of things.
Int.:                                            oka[y
Zhiyuan:                                              [but I (.) tt
            I think I havent had. some activities which is (.) #uh# solely
Int.:       mm.
Zhiyuan:    for. ss social networking,
Int.:       mm.
Zhiyuan:    and I only speak English .hh ↑o::h. (.) yeah. ↑such kind of ss
            uh Ive Ive attend some social networking events like weeks ago:
            with some (.) previous alumni
Int.:       mm.
Zhiyuan:    in my cohort,
Int.:       mm.
Zhiyuan:    and also with some professors, (.)
            .hh
            but I dont (1.0) Im not uhyeah
            Ill say the conversation context is still mixed,
Int.:       okay.
Zhiyuan:    both the academic and also
Int.:       yeah.
Zhiyuan:    social. yeah.
```

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