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Understanding the Study Abroad Experience for International Students from China at the University of Vermont

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Abstract

This article identifies key factors that contribute to successful cultural adjustments of Chinese international students at the University of Vermont (UVM). Cultural adjustments are factors which an individual faces when adapting to a different environment than the one they are accustomed to. Forty-seven students, ranging in age from 18 to 23 (62.2% business students, 57.4% female) participated in a survey that measured personality factors, social support, communication skills, job preparation and satisfaction. This study relates these components to a student's perceived level of confidence communicating in English (both written and speaking), perceived support, and amount of regret felt towards studying abroad. As studying abroad has become an increasingly popular phenomenon, understanding the transitions that many students confront when traveling to a new country has become more and more important. Analysis shows that increased feelings of support and greater confidence in communication skills results in a lesser amount of regret. Additionally, a student's satisfaction with their grades, academic experience and campus life overall were highly correlated with communication skills and support. Surprisingly, the lowest amount of regret was felt from students with low confidence in their communication skills, but perceived high amounts of support.

Background

The inspiration for this research project came from a first-hand experience of studying abroad in Changchun, China for an eight-week intensive language program. As a participant of this program, I had responsibilities that served as a catalyst for my language improvement, such as: signing a language pledge to only speak Chinese, attending class 20 hours a week, multiple hours of homework a night, weekly written and oral tests and presentations, meetings with a language partner for a minimum of two hours a week and participation in weekly cultural excursions. As an international student, I encountered a significant amount of culture shock and emotional distress associated with the sudden changes. This shock was comparable to the transition I felt my first year of college, but more severe. I became more aware of the cultural adjustments that I experienced during my time abroad and documented my entire journey with writing. I had a large amount of regret in the beginning, thinking that studying abroad was a huge mistake. This feeling was associated with a lack of confidence in my language abilities, lack of social support and companions and feelings of homesickness. By the last week, I felt content, satisfied with all my achievements and not ready to leave. I made friends that were Chinese and American, both at the university and in the community. My communications skills improved from interacting with locals, building confidence in class and having a greater understanding of the Chinese culture. I was in China for a short amount of time compared to students who study abroad for a four-year bachelor's degree, so my experience was more of a whirlwind. While abroad, I thought of the numerous amount of international students from China at my own university and how I could improve their experience studying at the University of Vermont (UVM). I am interested in this area of research, as it is understudied. This topic

presents many interesting research questions, but I will focus on one specific research question, exemplified in this paper.

Introduction

According to the Institute of International Education's 2014 Press Release, international students studying in the United States has risen 72 percent since 2000 and American students studying abroad has more than doubled in the past 15 years. International students primarily decide to go abroad in hopes that they will receive a better educational and professional setting than their home country; but many also partake to experience a new culture. Because of the increase in popularity and accessibility of studying abroad, there has been notable research done to study the effects of being fully immersed in a new country. The extent to which a person is able to assimilate to the new cultural surrounding and its social aspects directly correlates with the person's overall experience abroad. Cultural adjustments can be affected by strength of cultural identity, predetermined expectations, and the individual's ability to assimilate socially, academically and mentally. Despite education being a significant reason for going abroad, there is limited research that examines the best way for international students to learn in a different cultural environment. However, there is research that shows that studying abroad positively impacts an individual's degree of intercultural proficiency (Clark et al., 2009), which corresponds to academic and professional success. Educational institutions must take into consideration the barriers and stress associated with studying abroad, as well as the relationship between professor and student when creating effective educational programs.

It is important to recognize that there is a lot of confusion within the field in differentiating between the terms adjustment, adaptation, acculturation and assimilation. Kagan and Cohen (1990) describe adjustment involving both assimilation and acculturation, but in

ethnicity literature, all three terms are used interchangeably. Hannigan (1990) agrees saying that all four definitions “describe change that occurs when individuals or groups have contact with a different culture.” Bordas (2012) describes assimilation as being part of the “melting pot” and shedding one’s ethnic and national background, where acculturation requires people to be open-minded, adaptable and accomplished without losing their identity. In the current study, the term cultural adjustment is used to describe changes that occur when an international student from China is in contact with the local culture at the University of Vermont.

Cultural Adjustments while Studying Abroad: A Brief Review

Sociocultural Dimensions

The term sociocultural is the combination of social and cultural factors, with social being defined as “the interaction humans have with one another, either as individuals or in groups (Kent, 2006)” and culture being defined as “all knowledge that is acquired by human beings through their membership of a society (World Encyclopedia, 2014).” This includes factors such as language, cultural norms and social behavior. How a person responds to these components has a huge influence on how they will perceive their experience abroad. The degree of an individual’s cultural identity and their motivation for gaining insight on the new culture affects the ease of their cultural assimilation. On top of cultural differences and academic difficulties, unfulfilled expectations can lead to an increase in stress and declination of mental health.

Cultural Adjustments

Adler (1975) explains cultural adjustment “as a field problem in adaptation (i.e., learning a language; being able to recognize the names of cities, foods, and historical persons; and having

a working knowledge of the essential customs and habits of the people).” Black’s (1990) definition is similar as “the degree of psychological adjustment experienced by the individual or the degree of psychological comfort and familiarity that individual has for the new environment.” These definitions focus on adjustment as the knowledge being gained or becoming familiar with new customs and what is happening in a mental and emotional sense. Y.Y. Kim (2001) looks at the cultural adjusting process as establishing and then maintaining moderately strong relationships with the new environments. Experiencing culture requires involvement and actual participation in learning and internalizing a different way of life. It is a change in lifestyle, embracing another person’s culture and trying to make it your own. A different cultural experience gives insight into how other’s live and interact. Noticing these differences and accepting them can lead to a deeper cultural understanding.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is defined as “a set of deeper level personal beliefs that tend to be relatively stable over time” (Peng, et al., 2014). According to Tajfel’s (1981) social identity theory, if individuals are striving to fit in to the new surroundings, they will try to identify with the host groups norms to enhance social favorability and acceptance. A study conducted by Ward and Searle (1991) looked at the correlation between cultural identity and sociocultural and psychological factors. Factors such as ethnic stereotyping and tolerance can play a big role in how some individual feels in their environment. The researchers found that strong cultural identity correlated with sociocultural factors. A study conducted by Peng, Van Dyne and Oh (2014) supports the notion that individuals with strong cultural identities are unwilling to change their behavior. But, it furthermore suggests that if the individual is motivated to increase cultural intelligence, then the degree of cultural identity does not make a difference in enhancing cultural

well-being. Their research supports that those with strong cultural identity do not feel threatened or uncomfortable with those of a different culture, so they are willing to recognize and accept the host country's cultural norms (Peng et al., 2014). Experiencing an *identity gap*, which is the contrast between either how the student expresses themselves and see themselves or how they see themselves and how others see them, can result in negative effects (Jung & Hecht, 2004), making the acculturation more complicated.

Mental Health

As shown in the prior section, transitional expectations and factors can lead to an extensive amount of stress for international students. Dealing with this emotional stress can be a possible hindrance based on the cultures view of psychological assistance and mental health services (Mori, 2000). In some societies, mental distress is linked with weakness and shame, which can lead to the student feeling stigmatized (Aubrey, 1991). Western societies believe in an individualistic mentality, meaning they are more independent and apt to deal with a mental health issue with the belief that individuals are responsible and strong enough to take care of themselves (Brinson & Kottler, 1995). On the other hand, Asian countries take on more of a collectivism approach where they believe in a tight social framework, where members of the group feel responsible to help other members (D. W. Sue & Sue, 1990). With these differences in cultural beliefs, it may be complicated or uncomfortable to seek help, but there are many beneficial options through professors, counselors and peers.

International students are at greater risk of experiencing depressive symptoms due to issues interacting with the host culture and adjusting to a new daily lifestyle (Spencer-Oatety & Xiong, 2006). Stressful challenges that are faced include differences in communication and

culture, homesickness, loneliness, stereotyping and prejudice, limited social skills, and academic pressure. Experiencing one or more these problems will likely cause negative psychological outcomes, such as depressive symptoms (Jung et al., 2007). These thoughts could contribute to a feeling of disappointment with the decision to study abroad.

Transitional Expectations

In a study conducted by Margaret Pitt (2009), she followed 127 undergraduate students studying abroad in Paris, France. The participants were primarily American with a few from Japan; all but 13 participants were raised in the United States. Their majors spanned from French to art history to political science. She observed how they adjusted to living in a new culture and coping mechanisms used. She found that most difficulty and stress arose from expectation gaps or the stress associated with being let down by the reality of their experience not living up to what they imagined. Pitt found that many assumptions emerged from a combination of media representation, first-hand accounts from other students, and presentations given by the school. She discovered that the main expectations included social, language, academic, and cultural barriers.

Social Factor

Pitts (2009) found that prior to leaving, many students expected to develop a social network, to make a long-lasting friend whom they still communicated with once they returned to their native country and to connect with a family or friend with whom they could stay with if they chose to return. The students found that it was difficult to make friends due to language, gender and cultural barriers. This study was done in France where cross-sex friendships and socializing in large groups are uncommon. Many became discouraged by being unable to

communicate and connect with the host students and turned to strengthening relationships with co-national students instead.

Searle and Ward (1990) describe the term sociocultural as the “ability to ‘fit in’ and negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture (Searle and Ward, 1990).” Figuring out how to follow these elements is imperative when trying to adjust to unfamiliar customs. It is a common difficulty for international students to not be able to make friends with native students immediately (Klineberg & Hull, 1979). When it does not come easily, a student can feel inferior and alienated, especially if they were used to flourishing in their home country (Sandhu, 1991). Cultural differences can make it harder to acquire stronger, longer-lasting friendships and lead to feelings of exclusion (Lee and Rice, 2007). Many international students find that most difficulty is found in the daily social encounters. Those who are able to find, or already have a confidant while abroad have a higher likelihood of a positive and richer experience. Furnham and Bochner (1982) state that international students who are introduced into a new society by a close host friend face fewer problems than those who are left to take care of themselves. Green et al. (2001) found that the quality and quantity of friends abroad is the best way to reduce social loneliness. An interpersonal relationship with a native can help with language proficiency, assistance in personal and social support, and cultural and academic knowledge (Andrade, 2006). If a student is unable to make a native friend, it will be more difficult to adjust and understand the differences in culture. Additionally, Andrade’s (2006) conclusions suggest that “student affairs staff may have an incomplete picture of international student needs, a concern since they are largely responsible for support programs [of domestic students?].” If the student is shy and does not feel supported, they will not reach out for the help they need. Based on this argument, I hypothesize that:

H1: An increased feeling of support at the university leads to a decrease in regret with the decision to study abroad.

Language and Academic Factor

Pitts (2006) discovered that the most important goal for most students was to become fluent in French. The expectation gap was significant for even those who considered themselves on an advanced level. Communicating with locals was more stressful and more difficult than anticipated. Many students thought that the curriculum would be easier than in their native country and they would have less responsibilities. Unfortunately, language fluency does not happen instantly, which, in turn can make schoolwork difficult as well.

In a study done by Zhai (2002), she finds that the greatest adjustment problems for international students entering the United States is the educational system, cultural differences and language proficiency. Many complications of language arise due to accents, enunciation, slang and special uses of certain words (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991). Language barriers include verbal, written and non-verbal communication issues (Jackson, 2005). Difficulties in language proficiency directly result in low academic performance by making it harder to take notes, understand lectures, accomplish reading and writing assignments and take examinations (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986). It is also common that students will feel uncomfortable asking their professors to clarify questions and participate in class due to embarrassment regarding their language proficiency. Generally, professors will misperceive an international student who does not seek assistance as being irresponsible and lacking interest in their studies, as opposed to not being confident with their language skills (Fox, 1994). Although participation plays a smaller role as undergraduate, this is not the case in graduate and doctoral studies. Language skills are imperative to do well in seminars and to make strong connections with peers and faculty. If a

student does not possess adequate communication skills, it will be more difficult for them to excel because they will not be able to articulate their thoughts compared to those who are fluent in the language (Huntley, 1993), creating a significant disadvantage. This may cause even more stress for the student since most international students make up the best-educated portion of their native communities (Thomas & Althen, 1989). As such, many of the international students already hold themselves to extremely high expectations of academic success (Pedersen, 1991). This leads to higher levels of stress and not feeling satisfied with their accomplishments. Many international students can experience *cognitive fatigue*, which explained by Winkelman (1994) is “information overload.” That is, these students experience burnout or mental exhaustion from the continuous effort of processing many types of information, which was easily understood in their native language but not in their second language. This will cause a student’s work effectiveness to decrease. Based on this information, I argue that:

H₂: Increased confidence in communication skills (writing and speaking) leads to a decrease in regret with the decision to study abroad.

Obtaining foreign language proficiency not only requires a high demand of studying and strong linguistic ability, but also a substantial knowledge of the culture (Takahashi, 1989). Language and culture are not easily separable. Subbiondo (2005) discusses Benjamin Lee Whorf’s theory of language, culture and consciousness, stating that interpreting the world happens through the combination of language and the culture where it is spoken. It is common that as language proficiency improves, so does cultural understanding.

Cultural Factor

Expectation gaps relating to culture occur because students tend to romanticize how their experience abroad will play out. This assumption is not as much related to stress, as it is to disappointment. Pitts (2006) discovered that although the anticipated extent to how many cultural differences one would encounter during their time varied, “each student experienced culture shock to some degree.”

Adler (1975) defines culture shock “as a form of anxiety which results from the misunderstanding of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social interaction.” Many of these signs are learned and occur on a subconscious level, until they are removed by entering a new culture (Oberg, 1954). Zhou, et al. (2008) explains how difficult it is to adapt when one is aware of the differences ahead of time, but it is even harder for those who are misinformed or ignorant of the new customs. This researcher defines culture shock as “the collective impact of such unfamiliar experiences on cultural travellers in general.” This explanation puts more emphasis on the shock being a result of not being accustomed to the society. Hannigan (1990), citing Gardner (1962) suggests that the broader the degree of development between the countries, the greater the culture shock, and the harder it will be to acculturate. For example, it would be easier for an American to adjust to the changes in Australia or England than Cambodia or Tibet because the cultural differences are less extreme in the former than the latter.

Culture shock can result in prolonged stress, frustration, anger and depression (Westwood & Barker, 1990). Degrees of culture shock can range from psychological disturbance to panic and breakdown (Gabb, 2006). Some symptoms include anxiety, helplessness, short temper and the desire for a more pleasing environment (Oberg, 1958). For this reason, some describe culture

shock as an illness or disease, but it is treated as trouble with assimilating to the new environment (Arensberg & Niehoff, 1964). Research presented by Searle and Ward (1990) supports the prediction that the levels of social difficulty depends on cultural distance, but also that cognitive (expectancies) and emotional (depression) are factors of adjustment.

Interaction of Support and Confidence in Communication Skills

As explained in the aforementioned sections, social, language, academic and cultural factors contribute to an international student's perspective of their study abroad experience. The presence of social support is especially important if the student is feeling vulnerable and is having difficulty adjusting to the new environment. If the system provides an outlet for the student to cope and receive comfort, no matter the individual's abilities to express themselves in English, the support should in turn result in the student being grateful for the help. Based on this reasoning, I theorize that:

H₃: Increased support at the university level decreases regret faster for students with low confidence in communication skills compared to students with high confidence in communication skills.

Research Design

Participants

The participants in the study were 47 undergraduate or Global Gateway Program (GGP) international students from China studying at UVM. Chinese participants were chosen because these students represent the majority of international students at UVM. Also, based on major differences in Chinese language, cultural norms and customs compared to those in the United

States, it was assumed that the transition would be difficult for these students. Participants were both male and female students with ages ranging from 18 to 23 years old, GPA ranging from 2.5 to 3.96 (based on a 4.0 scale). These respondents are from six out of seven colleges at UVM (no participants from the College of Education and Social Services were represented). Most participants also completed GGP, a program offered at UVM to help international students with language and academic support, cultural adjustments and effective study skills. The majority of participants were female (57.4%), 21 years old (32.6%), an undergraduate that completed GGP (78.7%) and belong to the Grossman School of Business (62.2%). Including students from a variety of grades and majors created a larger sample pool. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics characterizing the participants, Chart 1 shows the gender distribution and Chart 2 displays the college distribution.

Table 1
Sample Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	43	18	23	20.33	1.267
GPA	37	3	4	3.27	.330
Valid N (listwise)	35				

Chart 1
Participant Distribution based on Gender

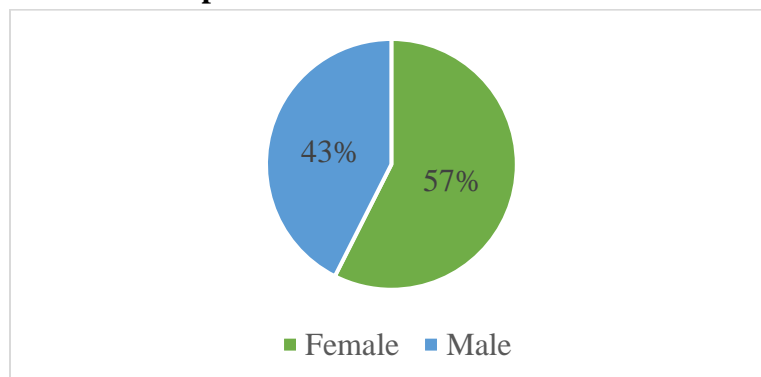
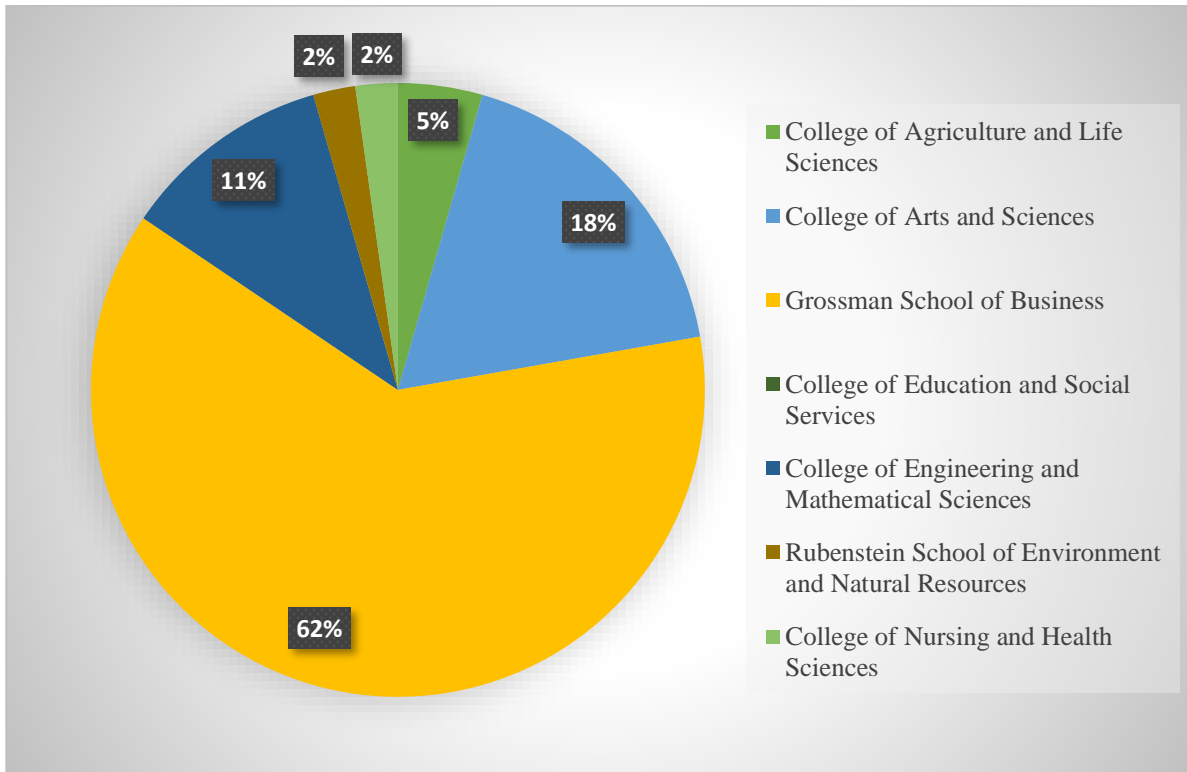


Chart 2
Participants Distribution based on College



Procedures

Preliminary research was done to construct the final survey distributed to the participants.

During my time as an international student in Changchun, China, I journaled every night. I kept track of my emotional state, achievements and struggles throughout the eight-week experience. I started making connections and thinking about what made me regret my decision to come and what contributed to my satisfaction studying abroad. When I returned to UVM in the fall, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with current undergraduates and recent graduate students of UVM. The interviews were conducted in English, all participants speak English as their second language. Each interview lasted 20-30 minutes. Interview questions are shown in Appendix 1. Key findings from interviews are demonstrated in Appendix 2. Several drafts of the survey were reviewed by Chun Zhang, Thesis Advisor and Emma Swift, Assistant Director for International

Student Services at UVM. The survey consisted of 30 questions, including dichotomous questions, 7-point Likert response scale questions, cumulative scale questions and an open-ended response for additional comments. All questions were voluntary and could be skipped without penalty. The survey was designed to take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. Surveys were distributed by being featured in the Office of International Education's weekly newsletter and with help from Student Services offices around campus. The final survey is displayed in Appendix 3.

Measures

The following variables are measured in the survey as they are considered to be important to a person's cultural adjustment success.

Personality traits. A student's personality, especially in new environments can be a determinant of their satisfaction (Caligiuri, 2000). A question from personality tests, such as The Big Five Personality Test and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) were used to measure this variable. The Big Five Personality Test is a theoretical framework that measures the degree to which a person exhibits extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience (Rentfrow, 2009). For the purposes of this study, a question relating to extraversion and openness to experience was chosen, as these variables are of particular relevance to a student's social skills and ease of participation in a new culture (Huang et al, 2005). MBTI consists of Likert response scale questions that test behavioral preferences and the "results are then tabulated to indicate preferences for each of the four scales, Extraversion-Introversion (EI), Sensing-Intuition (SN), Thinking-Feeling (TF) and Judgement-Perception (JP) (Pittenger, 1993)." Examples from all four scales were scattered amongst the survey, though

some questions were altered to fit the topic. It was important to better understand the way in which the student behaves and makes decisions.

Social support. This study focuses on the overarching feeling of support as opposed to specific aspects that of support, which should be pursued in future research. It was believed that this was a good place to start and recognized that specific types of support can be measured. Through personal experience and from in-depth interviews, it was identified that social support was a common factor that alleviated emotional distress during harder times. It is from having close friends and family to confide in during times of hardship and help from professors and other faculty that make a difficult transition easier. Friends and family can provide distraction from stressful situations, motivation to continue working hard and emotional reassurance through love and encouragement that things will get better. Professors and student services staff can supply advice and skills for ways to improve academic success, as well as develop ways for students to feel academically supported. All questions related to this measure were evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale. They included: You feel supported at UVM. At UVM, you have close friends. You feel comfortable asking your professors for help.

Communication skills. It was important to capture both aspects of communication, verbal and nonverbal. This was done by aggregating the questions “you are confident with speaking in English” and “you are confident with writing in English.” The degree to which these variables go together is indicated by an alpha of .749, suggesting the items have high internal consistency. Language is a major barrier regarding interpersonal relationships and understanding academic materials. Low language proficiency can bring feelings of isolation and inadequacy. The ability to express details and emotions through language and have that information be completely understood by others is an advantage that is not realized until it is taken away. A student’s

confidence and ability to communicate in the local culture's language is a major contributor to how their experience will transpire (Zhai, 2002).

Regret. The emotion of regret is a response that comes from a disappointing consequence of a decision and the thought that an alternative could have resulted in a better outcome (Zeelenberg et al., 1998). A student's college decision is a major choice, as it has implications to affect that individual's future. Although this decision is reversible and temporary, during the process and after the decision, a person could experience confusion around if this was the best decision or not. Due to differences in culture and language, as well as distance from home, the transition for a Chinese student to adapt to university life could arguably be more difficult than for American students. That feeling of dissatisfaction could lead to regret. The question "you regret coming to the United States to study abroad" was used to measure this subject.

Job preparation. Through in-depth interviews, it was discovered that many Chinese international students come to UVM because it is perceived that the education system is better in the United States. A student's parents believe that the benefit of finding a good job after graduation outweighs the financial burden. The job market requirements are different in the United States from those in China. In the United States, a hiring manager wants to see volunteer work, co-curricular activities and a well-rounded student. In China, hiring managers will be looking at a student's transcript, their GPA and how they did in each of their core classes. With contrasting demands between cultures, it is significant to understand if Chinese international students feel that UVM is preparing them for post-graduation job placement.

Satisfaction. Measuring a student's satisfaction is the ultimate way of understanding their attitude towards the university. Together with the variable of satisfaction, grades, academic experience and satisfaction with campus life in general were measured. In the correlation table

displayed in Table 2, these three measures are represented by an aggregate measure (satisfaction). This variable is highly correlated with communication skills, support, regret and GPA.

Analysis and Results

The hypotheses were tested using multiple regression. Table 2 displays the inter-variable correlations of the most important variables in the study.

Table 2
Correlation Table

		skills	support	regret	satisfaction	gender	GPA
skills	Pearson Correlation	1	.441**	-.141	.383**	-.282	.421*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002	.350	.009	.058	.010
	N	46	46	46	46	46	36
support	Pearson Correlation	.441**	1	-.544**	.727**	-.040	.260
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002		.000	.000	.789	.121
	N	46	47	47	47	47	37
regret	Pearson Correlation	-.141	-.544**	1	-.335*	-.104	-.389*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.350	.000		.021	.485	.017
	N	46	47	47	47	47	37
satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.383**	.727**	-.335*	1	-.107	.355*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.000	.021		.474	.031
	N	46	47	47	47	47	37
gender	Pearson Correlation	-.282	-.040	-.104	-.107	1	.062
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.058	.789	.485	.474		.714
	N	46	47	47	47	47	37
GPA	Pearson Correlation	.421*	.260	-.389*	.355*	.062	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.121	.017	.031	.714	
	N	36	37	37	37	37	37

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Hypotheses H₁ – H₃

The hypotheses were tested with multiple regression, shown in Table 3. The analysis reveals a negative relationship between regret and support, indicating if a student feels they are supported at the university, they will also have less regret about coming to the United States to study abroad. The relationship between regret and confidence in communication skills were also negative, showing the higher the confidence, the less regret. The interaction is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and in the direction hypothesized. This indicates that the more confidence a student has communicating in English paired with high amounts of support will lead to a lower amount of regret. Chart 3 demonstrates the plotted estimated values from the regression results to better understand the interaction. It can be further assumed that students with high confidence in their communication skills can get by without extensive support and not feel a significant amount of regret. The most interesting result is found in students with low confidence in communication skills and feelings of high support, as these students have the least amount of regret. Even if the student is unable to speak well, the system takes care of them and in return, they are thankful. Comparatively to students with high confidence in their communication skills, these students may take their experience for granted because they may not feel that they are learning as much, improving as quickly or recognize the benefits of studying abroad.

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis

Outcome: regret

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6202	.3847	1.5911	8.7529	3.0000	42.0000	.0001

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	12.6705	3.4100	3.7157	.0006	5.7887	19.5522
skills	-1.5883	.7180	-2.2122	.0324	-3.0373	-.1393
support	-2.1059	.6149	-3.4249	.0014	-3.3469	-.8650
int_1	.3138	.1233	2.5454	.0147	.0650	.5627

Product terms key:

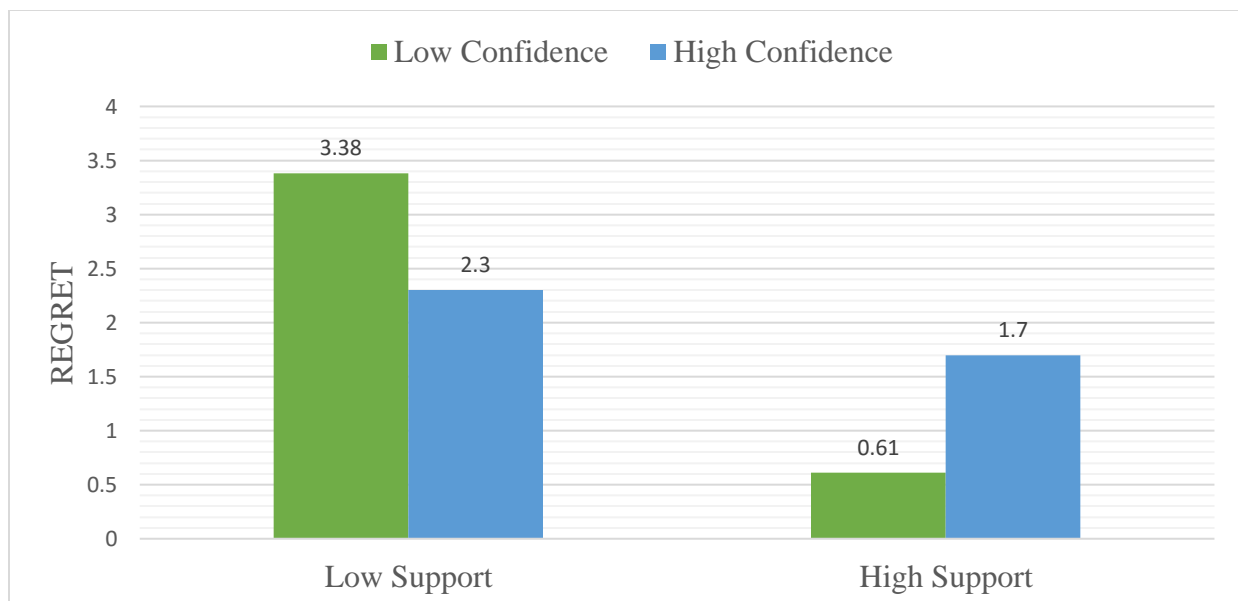
int_1 support X skills

R-square increase due to interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
int_1	.0949	6.4791	1.0000	42.0000	.0147

Chart 3

Spotlight Diagram to Visually Depict the Interaction between Support, Regret and Confidence in Communication Skills



Robustness check was preformed to evaluate the robustness of pattern of results across measures of confidence in communication skills. Gender was added as a covariate control variable to test if the sex of an individual explains possible confidence due to the correlation between the two variables, shown in Table 2. As show in Table 4, the pattern of results shown by the signs of the coefficients and significance of the p-value ($p=.0234$) are the same comparatively to the regression analysis, so gender does not explain the results. GPA was also run as a covariate control variable based on the correlation significance shown in Table 2. As displayed in Table 5, the sign of the coefficients is the same and the p-value (.0842) is significant at 0.1, showing that a student's GPA does not explain their confidence in communication skills and is not driving the regression analysis results.

Table 4
Robustness Check: Gender

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Outcome: regret

Model Summary
      R      R-sq      MSE      F      df1      df2      p
      .6207    .3852    1.6285    6.4227    4.0000    41.0000    .0004

Model
      coeff      se      t      p      LLCI      ULCI
constant    12.5729    3.4888    3.6039    .0008    5.5272    19.6187
skills      -1.5616    .7402    -2.1095    .0410    -3.0565    -.0666
support     -2.0682    .6537    -3.1639    .0029    -3.3885    -.7480
int_1       .3068    .1303    2.3552    .0234    .0437    .5699
gender      -.0782    .4165    -.1877    .8520    -.9193    .7630

Product terms key:
      int_1      support      X      skills

R-square increase due to interaction(s):
      R2-chng      F      df1      df2      p
int_1      .0832    5.5472    1.0000    41.0000    .0234

```

Table 5
Robustness Check: GPA

Outcome: regret

Model Summary

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
	.7319	.5356	1.4364	8.9395	4.0000	31.0000	.0001

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	14.8452	3.7371	3.9724	.0004	7.2232	22.4672
skills	-1.2030	.7899	-1.5230	.1379	-2.8140	.4080
support	-1.7938	.6860	-2.6150	.0137	-3.1928	-.3947
int_1	.2435	.1365	1.7839	.0842	-.0349	.5219
GPA	-1.2182	.7089	-1.7183	.0957	-2.6640	.2277

Product terms key:

int_1 support X skills

R-square increase due to interaction(s):

	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p
int_1	.0477	3.1825	1.0000	31.0000	.0842

Limitations

The findings of the study should be interpreted considering the following limitations. First, this study was limited by involvement, as only a small percentage of the entire population of Chinese international students at UVM participated in the survey. With more participators, trends and correlations between grade levels could have also been analyzed. Second, the research includes not being able to measure for some important variables, such as, number of years in the United States or number of years learning English. Although the data collected indicates how many students completed Global Pathway Program (GPP), it does not exemplify their success in the program or provide a quantifiable level of English proficiency. These variables could be driving the data for confidence in communication skills.

Future Research

Students decide to study abroad for the experience and the hope that it will put them ahead in their academic and professional careers. There is extensive research on the effects of studying abroad, but how these factors and struggles are related to academic support programs is under-researched. There is data to support that international students have a particularly hard time assimilating, which affects not only academia, but also mental health and social behavior. There are recommendations of many teaching tactics professors can use, such as being more culturally sensitive, but there has been little research on how different types of educational programs could improve learning effectiveness for international students. Many international students are aware of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels, but it is difficult for them to identify the sources of their dissatisfaction. Further research should be done to identify the specific types of support a student is currently receiving and what type of support international students feel is lacking. This could include, how to facilitate social support, the effectiveness of interacting with diverse groups or the level of cultural awareness and competence on campus.

Implications

I will be combining research from literature, as well as empirical findings from the study to give recommendations to university faculty. Based on comprehensive research, below is a brief review of best practices in education from an international student's perspective and educators of multicultural classrooms.

Best Practices in Education

It has been shown that there are many struggles an international student could encounter when studying abroad. These are important factors to consider when creating educational programs that will be most effective. A study administered by Nieto and Booth (2009) found that it is the responsibility of both the student and professor to address any obstacles. During time abroad, students gain not only knowledge in their field of study through academic courses, but also in cultural proficiency through experiencing another country's norms (Kitsantas, 2004). The process of learning and adapting to cultural norms is not easy and a student could struggle with a variety of factors. A university must provide support outlets where the student feels comfortable attending for coping techniques and the student must be willing to accept help from the institution. It is important to realize that a country's distinctive cultures based on values and tradition shape the essence and content of education (Gabb, 2006). College is a transitional time in life; and it is important to recognize that the opinions and attitudes of students are likely to change during this time, no matter where they study (Leonard, 1964). Since studying abroad is a fairly new phenomenon, there is still limited research on the best ways to successfully teach.

Institution Perspective

Language Policy

English is well known as a global *lingua franca*, or common language, which explains the popularity of studying abroad in English-speaking countries. Many students from non-Anglophone countries will seek higher education in an English-speaking country to gain insight into the culture and practice language fluency. Due to the high desirability of studying at an English-speaking university, institutions in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and United

States are able to charge a higher tuition for international students to attend than for domestic students (Hughes, 2008). International students travel the distance and pay the inflated fee because they believe the benefits of studying abroad in an English-speaking country will outweigh the costs. It is believed that even exceptional non-English-speaking institutions cannot fairly compete in training “global citizens” compared with those of their English-speaking counterparts (Hughes, 2008). Nevertheless, China’s government has indicated that they would like 10-20% of their undergraduate programs to someday be taught in English (Hughes, 2008). Similar policy changes have also been made in Germany and France to attract more international students. This shows how countries whose dominant language is not English are making an effort to alter their educational systems in a more global-minded way. Since English-speaking countries already have the upper hand, there is less incentive to change their programs.

Professors Perspective

Challenges of Teaching in a Cross-cultural Classroom

In cross-cultural classrooms, professors are faced with the difficult task of teaching not only students of different academic skill levels, learning styles, and personalities, but also those of varying language abilities and cultural backgrounds. The social dynamics of cross-cultural classrooms are likely to be different than those of a mono-cultural nature due to “tension and distrust, shyness and embarrassment, quite apart from potential racism (Gabb, 2006).” This apprehension felt by international students can be with other students as well as with professors. It is important for educators to realize this obstacle with trust when interacting with and addressing their students. Many professors must step out of their comfort zones to undertake the potential issues with not being understood by students and conversely, not being able to

understand their needs or where they are struggling. Professors should be open and vulnerable with the students to establish a deeper level of trust (Gabb, 2006). At the same time, they must be conscientious to avoid controversial issues, such as racism and hegemony in their lessons (Gay, 2002).

If a professor is culturally unaware of the norms that students of different upbringing possess, it can create problems with how they view the student's behavior. For example, in a study done by Sileo and Prater (1998), they observed that African-American student who are accustomed to a more interactive environment of participating and commenting during class, were deemed problematic and disruptive by European American teachers who were not used to this response. This misunderstanding can be confusing and frustrating to students who were merely behaving the way they would in their native culture.

Recommendations for Teaching in a Cross-cultural Classroom

To deal with the difficulties of miscommunication and understanding with international students, educators need a system that helps on how to deal with cultural and linguistic differences. Smith (1998) recommends a method called *culturally responsible pedagogy*, which is when,

Schools, colleges, and departments of education have a moral and ethical responsibility to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive, that is, to enable teachers to respond to the educational needs of their diverse student populations by planning and developing culturally rich curricula and by using instructional methodologies that are based upon knowledge about how culture influences cognitive learning styles (p. 19).

This style of teaching requires multicultural training of formal course work, field experiences, and interactive classroom time. The outcome is an educator who understands how to address diversity and form their curricula around multicultural content (Smith, 1998). A study conducted

by Nieto and Booth (2009) supports this procedure, concluding that instructors with a higher degree of intercultural sensitivity are more likely to aid international students in feeling accepted.

Gay (2013) recommends a method called *culturally responsive teaching*, which she defines as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.” This style of teaching aids achievement by educating students of diversity through the understanding of their own cultural backgrounds. A teacher must first identify and understand the existing obstacles before they can successfully remove and then alter them (Gay, 2002). In this framework, it is the educator’s responsibility to help their students learn through the domain of education and the world. This includes being aware of and emphasizing the culture and learning styles of each student, for every lesson. Some instructors may be resistant to this teaching style because it puts significant responsibility on them. Ultimately, it is important to remember that it is a developmental process that requires learning over time and the primary goal is to accomplish educational equity and achievement for all students (Gay, 2013).

In addition, Gabb (2006) also suggests that educators address cultural diversity in the classroom. This can be done by asking about aspects of the content that relates to home country experiences or interests. She suggests that students can also work together in culturally diverse pairs or small groups to encourage talking about cultural value and experience differences. This can guide students and professors to “gain experience awareness of what makes a people unique—their customs, their traditions, their values and beliefs, attitudes and concepts, hierarchies and roles, time and space relations, and verbal and nonverbal communication processes (Harris &

Morgan, 1987).” These activities promote togetherness and can decrease feelings of alienation in the classroom.

Based on the empirical study, support to the student should also happen outside of the classroom. Professors must be aware of the resources on campus that can help students who are facing struggles regarding their mental health, academics, where to find support, etc. Increased feeling of support has a huge impact on if the student feels as if they made a mistake. A professor or student services staff member could make all the difference in if the individual experiences satisfaction.

Students Perspective

Challenges of Learning in a Cross-cultural Classroom

As stated in the language and academic factor section of the literature review, international students experience difficulties both inside and outside of the classroom while studying abroad. These struggles can hinder their potential academic success. In a study looking at graduate level international students, Trice (2003) identifies added challenges that international students face compared to domestic students. These include language barriers that affect course performance, segregation and stereotyping from domestic students creating feelings of isolation and taking time to become culturally assimilated. These difficulties are on top of regular college issues like costs associated with travelling, heavy course load, lack of motivation, and desire to do well for oneself and family (Andrade, 2006). In a study done by Littlewood (2001), it was found that many Asian students were more comfortable in being “passive listeners” during class, not due to a lack of knowledge or desire to participate, but that is the norm in their native countries. It takes time for international students to first understand, and

then adjust to standard classroom norms, especially if it is very different from what they are accustomed to and it is uncomfortable to change.

Recommendations for Learning in a Cross-cultural Classroom

International students are at greater risk for facing academic obstacles due to the many challenges they face when entering into a new environment. It can be particularly difficult to seek help, but it is important to note that instructors are a main factor in student's feelings of acceptance in a college setting (Nieto & Booth, 2009). Biggs (2001) compiled three approaches to learning that students' use based on their motives; these strategies consist of surface, deep and achieving approach. The surface approach roots from extrinsic motivation, where a student sees studying hard as a means to a desired job in the future. The deep approach is based on enthusiasm in the subject and the student works hard because they have a general interest in learning more. The achieving approach stems from wanting to do well so that they will be perceived to be smarter indicated by getting higher grades. If the student is aware of their approach to learning, then it will be easier for a professor to help them in their new setting (Biggs, 1991). Building a relationship with a professor can be the greatest asset for a student studying abroad. Reaching out for help shows their professor that they are willing to put in the effort and have an interest in doing well. Both the student and teacher will gain a better awareness of the challenges each face, and then can figure out how to address them in the future (Nieto & Booth, 2009). It may be difficult at first, but understanding each other's culture is the key to success in a cross-cultural classroom and will ultimately be rewarding for both the student and professor (Diller & Moule, 2005).

Discussion

This article provides insight into the importance of understanding key cultural adjustments that international students face when entering a new environment. With the increasing enrollment of international students, it is more and more important to research this area of study. The study abroad transition has the implications to affect an individual socially, mentally, emotionally and academically. Increased perceptions of support and confidence in communication skills lower feelings of regret towards the decision to study abroad. Students choose their university for a variety of reasons, and it is the institution's responsibility to assist the individual into believing they made the correct decision. It is a joint effort between the two parties to make the adjustment more manageable.

The university and students should work together to improve student's language competency, to further lower regret. The admissions office should use additional measures to gauge a student's language level or confidence in addition to standardized tests. Students must pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a basic requirement to be accepted to the university, but furthermore, this test should be used to indicate those who have lower communication abilities. The university should provide those students with added support to aid their education and enhance their experience abroad.

It is the student's responsibility to take the steps necessary for their success, such as getting accustomed to the culture, improving language proficiency and making friends with locals. Also, students should take initiative before attending college and research what support there is available before choosing their university program. The University of Vermont should advertise the outlets that are accessible to international students to reassure that they will receive help, if needed. Professors and student services staff need to increase their level of support,

especially to students with low communication skills confidence. It is the administration's role to understand the adjustments the student is undergoing and provide a support system that makes the individual feel comfortable. Encouraging students to reach out if they need help and presenting the encouragement they need is invaluable to their experience abroad. Essentially, it is the amount of support felt by the student that determines if they feel the experience has been worthwhile.

Perceived feeling of support is important for all international students from China, but especially for those who have low confidence in their abilities to communicate in English. These students need more help with understanding their studies, connecting with locals and adjusting to the new environment. The probability of regretting the decision to study abroad is the highest amongst individuals with low communication skill confidence and low support. However, the students that feel highly supported and have lower levels of language competence experience the lowest amount of regret. This is a result of the student feeling gratitude towards the institution for helping them through hardship. It is the responsibility of both students and administration to collaborate in an effort to improve support systems, and ultimately enhance the study abroad experience.

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Appendix 1:

Interview Questions:

- What was your motivation for studying abroad?
- What was your motivation for choosing your major?
- What activities do/did you do in your free time?
- What do/did you like the most about studying abroad?
- What are the hardest aspects to adjust to while abroad? Why?
- Was there ever a time you regretted participating in your study abroad experience? Why?
- Can you recall a difficult time while abroad and what helped you through that experience?
- Do/did you find it difficult to find close friends? Why?
- Do/did you have any friends that are/were not from your home country?
- How do/did you meet your friends?
- Do you like American style teaching compared to your home country's style of teaching?
- Do you think that your perspective of America has changed from studying abroad?
- Are you satisfied studying abroad? What would improve your satisfaction?

Appendix 2:

Common Trends:

- Chinese students feel that there is not a lot to do, feel that they do not have enough opportunities
- Even though many are not satisfied with their academics, they do not regret coming to America because it was a good opportunity to learn about a different lifestyle
- Most find that it is difficult to make close friends with Americans
- Do not speak English with friends because it is easier to express themselves through native language
- It is frustrating not being able to understand conversations or why people are laughing, gives motivation for improving language skills
- Those that go to professors or tutors became more satisfied with their academics
- Students struggle to find a common interest with American students
- Most of the students are motivated to study abroad because they want to make their parents happy, most of the students either let their parents choose majors for them or follow their friends' choices.
- Due to the language barrier, taking classes is very difficult – some students feel they are studying double or triple the amount of time, not a lot of time to do other things
- American education has taught them about critical thinking and having an open-mind
- They feel that American universities are better than Chinese universities.

Interesting Insights:

- Feels that to make friends with Americans, they would need to give up some of their cultural norms to feel accepted

- Found that even if they had both Chinese and American friends, they could not hang out with them together due to the language barrier
- Feels that they must sacrifice studying if they were to go to events and spend time making friends. It is very difficult to have both
- Feels that professors assume that all students understand the structure and platforms that are used in class

Appendix 3:

Understanding the Study Abroad Experience at the University of Vermont

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you currently are studying abroad from China at the University of Vermont. This study is being conducted by Cecilia Baker, a senior in the Grossman School of Business at UVM. The purpose of this study is to understand your study abroad experience. I want to assure you that your responses are anonymous and cannot be traced back to you. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Thank you for your participation!

1. Age

- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23

2. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other: _____

3. I am a...

- Global Gateway Program (GGP) Student
- Undergraduate that completed GGP
- Undergraduate that did not complete GGP

4. City of Origin

5. Province in China
