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## Assessing the Effects of Short-Term Culture and Language Immersion Program: A Hong Kong Case

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***Abstract:***

*The current study examines the effects of a four-week short-term culture and language immersion program. The Program involves four key curricular components and covered three phases: the pre-trip planning and preparations, implementation of the Program, and the post-trip debriefings. Data were collected prior to, during, and after the students' taking their four-week immersion program. A 360-degree assessment of the Program was employed to evaluate its effectiveness. The assessment involves triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. Two statistical measurements (Analysis and Variance and Pearson Correlation Coefficient tests) were employed to assess the Program effectiveness. The results show that the four-week short-term culture and language immersion program achieved all its learning objectives. By all measures, the students experienced increased confidence in using English, demonstrated a greater awareness of culture, were able to identify and explain cultural differences between Hong Kong and the host culture, and learned to apply language learning strategies and to begin to develop intercultural communication skills.*

***Keywords:*** *assessing, short-term culture, language immersion program*

## **1. Introduction**

It has long been discussed that study abroad programs have positive impacts on developing second-language learning (Churchill, 2006; Freed, 1995; Magnan & Back, 2007) and on enhancing intercultural competence (Schauer, 2009; Watson, Siska, & Wolfel, 2013). In light of the educational benefits, study abroad program has attracted growing popularity, particularly among non-native English speaking countries. In Asia, a steady growing number of higher education institutions follow the suits, emphasizing that study abroad program is a core element of the university strategic goals to achieve the internationalized education bandwagon in the 21st century (Green, Luu, & Burris, 2008; Siaya & Hayward, 2003). It is not uncommon that universities articulate their missions in the aspect of internationalization by stating that “the institution will instill in its students the intercultural competency skills necessary to successfully engage, compete, and thrive in an increasingly diverse and globally interconnected world” (Salisbury, 2011, p. 23).

Facing the rapid changes in the globalized world with increasingly demand in English, universities in Asian countries where English is not the first language are seeking ways to help students enhance their English language skills and widen international horizon. In Asian countries, particularly Hong Kong, the number of the short-term culture and language immersion programs (thereafter refer as immersion program or Program) organized by universities has been increasing over the last decade (e.g., Bodycott & Crew, 2004; Jackson, 2005). The culture and language immersion program is a culture and English-language enhancement initiative offered to the undergraduate students or pre-service teaching (e.g., Sutherland, 2011) where students spend four to five weeks during the summer studying at partner universities in English-speaking countries to improve their English language proficiency and intercultural communication competency.

Research on the effects of study abroad programs was originated from the institutions of higher education in the United States for more than two decades (e.g., Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimovicz, 1990; Dennis, 2004; McMurtrie, 2005), yet, the research is still underdeveloped and lacking the systematic assessments that produce convincing evidence to show the effects of the study abroad programs on overall student learning (see, Rubin & Sutton, 2001; Sideli, 2001; Vande Berg, 2001). A critical review of the relevant studies reveals that reasons for such inconclusive findings are in three areas. The first issue is the methodological weakness (e.g., Salisbury, 2011). The second is in regard to the threshold time period to make difference in language and culture in terms of the length of study abroad program. The third issue is that whether students benefit from the short-term study program in both language and culture enhancement.

While findings of the past research reveal that students’ self-confidence, research skills, language skills and cultural understanding can be improved through the short-term immersion program, majority of these studies investigated its effectiveness of the immersion program using qualitative data that made the analyses tend to be descriptive in anecdotal a manner. Sideli (2001) asserted that although 95% of study abroad programs assessed student satisfaction, only few studies indicated the gains

in academic achievement, personal development, or intercultural skills as a result of study abroad programs. Although scholars recognized the importance of anecdotal stories and qualitative analysis that reveal the value of qualitative aspects of the program, they also find it critical to provide quantitative data that measure the extent to which or in what aspect the study program benefits the student learning. It is no doubt that the provides insights on the effectiveness and future program design, however, it fails to show the extent to which the study abroad program benefits students and the relationships among factors that are likely to affect the success of the program.

As for the program duration, it seems a common sense that participants of longer-term study abroad programs are more likely to experience greater changes than those of participants in short-term study abroad programs (e.g., Dwyer, 2004; Hadis, 2005; Zielinski, 2007). However, the findings in relation to the length of the study abroad program and the effects haven't been conclusive. Study by Fry, Paige, Jon, Dillow, and Nam (2009) found positive effects on the long-term study abroad experience in terms of cultural appreciation and being open-minded towards world views. In contrast, Dwyer (2004, 2011) found that short-term study abroad students have achieved as much sustainable benefits as those of semester-long study abroad students in non-linguistic outcomes, such as motivational results, academic attainment, career impact, and intercultural development (see, also Allen, 2010). Other studies (e.g., Bodycott Crew, 2004; Davidson, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Heron, 2004) also concluded that short-term program can effectively serve these purposes.

Given the fact of the affordability, the shorter-term study abroad programs have become increasingly popular in the US (e.g., Hofius, 2004; McMurtrie, 2005) and in Asia (Jakson, 2005, 2008; Sutherland, 2011). Research in relation to the study abroad programs has claimed that sustainable benefits can be observed in non-linguistic outcomes, little research done to investigate whether and to what extent the short-term study abroad program enhance language proficiency. Allen and Heron' (2003) study revealed significant gains in enhancing second-language proficiency upon the completion of a six-week study abroad program in the areas of pronunciation and listening. In this regard, scholars (e.g., zamastil-Vondrovan, 2005) advocate by raising the issue about the educational value as to whether students really benefit from a four-to six weeks of minimal international exposure, particularly in the enhancement of language proficiency.

In Asia, a number of studies examined the extent to which students benefit from short-term programs, particularly those programs lasting from a week to four weeks in countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea (see for example, Almond, 2004; Bodycott & Crew, 2004; Chaselng, 2004; Huer, 2009; Jackson, 2005; Jewel & Williams, 2004; Overbeek, 2008; Walters, 2004). Most of these studies have looked into intercultural gains as a result of study abroad experiences. To fill this research gap, the purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of a four-week short-term cultural and language immersion program from both culture and language perspectives. To determine its effectiveness and impact on the culture and language enhancement, the Program has built in a 360-degree measurement from various

stakeholders. Employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods, the present study examines the extent to which the Program enhances student's English language proficiency and intercultural competence. In so doing, I first review the related literature on the influence of study abroad programs on enhancing culture and language. Second, I present a theory-base and the design that summaries the essence of the Program. Third, I describe the evaluation mechanism and report the effectiveness of the Program from the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as students, partner universities, and independent consultants. I finally conclude by putting forth recommendations.

## **2. Literature Review**

The present study examines the effects of short-term culture and language immersion program on enhancing students' intercultural competence and English language proficiency. To establish a frame of reference, I first review the studies that examined the effects of the short-term study abroad programs on enhancing intercultural competence. I also review the relationships of study abroad programs on developing language proficiency.

### **2.1 Intercultural Competence and Study Abroad Program**

The cultural and language immersing program (generally called study abroad program) has long been considered a powerful mechanism for developing and enhancing intercultural competence (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010). Effects of intercultural competence have emerged as an important factor to assess the success of the overseas study abroad program (e.g., Deardorff, 2006; Watson et al., 2013). Past studies from various academic disciplines have demonstrated the educational benefits of long-or-short term study abroad programs (see, for example, Lewin, 2009; McKeown, 2009; Savicki, 2008). Studies supporting intercultural gains as a result of study abroad experiences have concluded positive impacts on cross-cultural skills, global outlook, and world views (e.g., Hadis, 2005; Kitsansas, 2004).

Engle and Engle (2004, 2012) reported that over half of the participants experienced a substantial gain on the results of their Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer et al., 2003; Hammer, 2009). Other studies by Black and Duhon (2005) and Peppas (2005) examined the impact of short-term study abroad programs by comparing a pre-and post-trip cross-cultural adaptability inventory measurement and found positive impact on cultural sensitivity and personal development. In Asia, Jackson (2005, 2008) examined the effects of the study abroad program on a group of Hong Kong undergraduate students and showed consistent improvement on their Intercultural Development Inventory, throughout their experience abroad.

### **2.2 Language Enhancement and Study Abroad Program**

The interconnectedness of language and culture in a study abroad environment has been seen an important research focus. Language plays a critical and essential role, and therefore remains an intricate part of the "cultural fabric" in that language is "shaped and meanings are produced." (Duranti, 2009, p. 1). Language enhancement remains one of the common measurements to determine the success of study abroad

program. Several U.S. studies have confirmed the gains in second- language acquisition for students who study abroad in non-English speaking countries (e.g., Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Parr, 1988; Rivers, 1998). Study by Churchill and DuFon (2006) also shows that the enhancement of linguistic abilities predominantly in the areas of speaking, listening, and reading and that the improvements are influenced by variables such as length of immersion (Brecht et al., 1995; Davidson, 2010), lodging type (Rivers, 1998; Schmidt-Rinehard & Knight, 2004), amount of social interaction (Magnan & Back, 2007) and individual differences (Kinginger, 2011; Hunley, 2010). Study of a long-term study abroad program by Carlson, Burn, Useem and Yachimowicz (1991) has shown that language proficiency appeared to increase substantially, especially in the area of speaking skills in addition to the increase of culture awareness towards host cultures. Evidence of other similar studies (Parr, 1988; Rivers, 1998) also has confirmed the gains in second language acquisition for students who study abroad.

The results of the study aboard research have shed lights in helping the understanding of the outcomes of study abroad programs. However, the issues still remains in terms of the extent to which the length of study abroad program does matter so as to allow participants to internalize their learning in terms of culture and language. To fill the gap, more empirically grounded research is needed to address the effect of short-term study abroad programs and the impacts of the Program on student learning. Based on the review of the literature review, the current study aims to examine the effects of a four-week short-term culture and language immersion program by assessing whether the learning outcomes in relation to both language and culture are fulfilled.

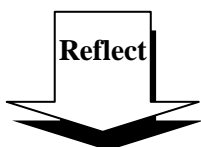
These learning outcomes are whether the Program:

1. Provides students with opportunities to improve their English language communicative competence by immersion in an English-speaking setting, by attending tailor-made classes with international students, and by participating in structured language learning opportunities outside of the classroom.
2. Enables students to gain a deeper understanding of the target culture through social activities with locals, cultural visits, and studies.
3. Broaden students' horizons and global cultural awareness through interaction with local and international students, host families, and the local community and through project work so as to gain a better understanding and appreciation of different cultures.
4. Enables the students to develop the ability to use more language learning strategies in order to cope with the English language. Through contact and interaction with local people, students have the opportunity to acquire knowledge of different varieties of English and to discover how different these language variations are from each other, and from Hong Kong English.

### **3. Theory-Base of the Program Design**

The underlying theory for the design of the culture and language immersion program is based on the five-stage Action Research Spiral model (see, for example, Kember

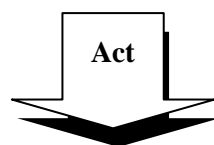
& Kelly, 1993; Lewin, 1946/1988) to reflect the action learning process. In the following, I will describe how the Program curriculum activities were facilitated through the course of the project.



There is a growing recognition that culture and language immersion is representing “the wave of the future global education”. Although the immersion program has been incorporated into undergraduate curriculum for various purposes, the effects haven’t been conclusive. While scholars (e.g., Churchill, 2006; Freed, 1995; Magnan & Back, 2006) concluded that studying abroad facilitates students’ learning, others (Zamastil-Vondrován, 2005) argued that the study abroad program does not benefit participants with minimal exposures. Discrepancies may have lain in perception gap. The initial problem underlying the Program described in this paper was the lack of realistic perception on the contents of the program and the student perception. The optimal goal of the Program is to provide ample opportunity to expose students in an authentic English-speaking and cultural environment so as to enhance students’ language and intercultural competence, and thereby, better equip students for their future careers working in a multicultural working environment. Students however felt that the immersion program should not be an extension of the formalized academic program. Consequently, the Program was further designed to add realism and raise student motivation and involvement by incorporating the components of homestay and community projects in a realistic and practical way.



The plan consists of four aspects of the Program including tailor-made language lessons; community and research projects; cultural excursions and social gatherings; and homestay.



The action phase focused on the actual running and the monitoring of the running of the Program. This phase consists of the implementation of the Program and the close monitoring and constant feedback with the partner universities



The observation phase was employed and multiple (a 360-degree) evaluation procedures were used to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the Program from differing perspectives and at various times during the course of the project. The evaluation aimed at uncovering general and specific impressions, problems, and suggestions for improvement. Mechanisms used for evaluating the learning process included student blogs, pre-and post trip questionnaires, debriefing, and focus group discussion. Two independent consultants were also employed to provide

instantaneous feedback on students' blog submissions, and assess the effectiveness of the Program.



This is the period in which to reflect critically on the successes of the Program and needs for improvements. Debriefing was conducted two weeks after students returned to the campus. For objectivity, an experienced moderator was hired to provide training to the other five moderators. Focus of the debriefing is to detect the difficulties encountered by students and provide prompt feedback.

#### **4. Description of the Cultural and Language Immersion Program**

The culture and language immersion program is an English enhancement and cultural experience program aiming to strengthen students' English language skills as well as to develop their intercultural awareness through engaging in a 4-week overseas English-speaking environment. Students from academic units were sent to the designated universities in English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States, and Australia. To maximize students' learning opportunity, the guidelines for Program comprised of three broad stages, namely pre-trip preparation stage (stage 1), on-the-trip monitoring stage (stage 2), and post-trip debriefing stage (stage 3). In the next, I describe the essence of the activities.

##### **4.1 Stage 1: Pre-trip Preparations**

Stage 1 refers to the preparation work before sending students to overseas. These activities included: (1) identifying and liaising with overseas partner institutions, (2) undergoing student selection procedures and criteria, (3) establishing quality assurance mechanism, (4) arranging pre-departure workshops and logistics, and (5) collecting pre-trip questionnaires.

**4.1.1 Identifying and Liaising with Overseas Partner Institutions.** Once overseas partner universities were identified, the invitation letters were sent to ten universities located in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. The potential host universities and their affiliated English Language Centers were encouraged to submit proposals and budgets. Based on the phone interviews with potential partner universities, four universities were chosen and their campuses were located in the Scotland, London, Perth, and New York,

**4.1.2 Undergoing Student Selection Procedures and Criteria.** In order to allow the departments to be more involved in the student selection process, each department appointed a coordinator. The Director of the Internationalization met with the six departmental coordinators to discuss and solicit selection procedures, criteria, and the distribution of the quotas. It was decided that the quotas would be based on a proportion of the first- and second-year intakes. The department that was not able to fill the assigned quota would need to yield the remaining number of places for redistribution.



As central funding was sought to support the College-level culture and language enhancement initiative, the Program was opened to those students who (1) were College full-time University Grants Council (UGC) funded undergraduate students; and (2) had a minimum CGPA score of 2.5 or above. Interested and eligible students were invited to submit application forms and required documents. In order to encourage students to take the application seriously, students were required to submit an action/study plan, which accounted for 10 points, one-third of the total score in the selection process. Upon receiving application documents, the internationalization team members checked the documents and invited applicants for group interviews. The criteria for the group interviews were divided into four categories with a five-point scale for each category ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high) for the degree of quality. The total marks were 20 points. Details of the four categories are as follows:

1. **Confidence level** – whether the student is confident enough (e.g. active/passive), shows leadership abilities, etc.
2. **Motivation** – whether the student is sufficiently willing to learn, be open, and be proactive in demonstrating a good initiative in given situations.
3. **Maturity** - whether the student is mature enough to handle various obstacles and difficulties when overseas.
4. **Right aims and mindset** – whether the student has the right aims and mindset for the EI.

Aside from the four identified criteria, English language proficiency was also assessed so as to determine whether the student possessed adequate spoken English competence at the threshold level to be able to communicate with native-English speakers during their overseas study. After the group interviews, a recommendation list was prepared, and applicants were ranked in order, based on the total marks scored, according to the four identified criteria. A total of 85 students were selected and 18 students (three from each department) made up a waiting list.

Based on the applicants' English language proficiency, a stratification method was suggested to the departmental coordinator to ensure that a balance in language proficiency among the students was provided for each partner university. Hence, the student group sent to each partner university comprised students who had high language proficiency and also low language proficiency. In order to maximize the number of students who could benefit from the Scheme and be exposed to the English-speaking countries, students who had successfully applied for both the student exchange scheme to study in an English-speaking country and the English Immersion scheme were given an option to choose which scheme they wished to participate in.

**4.1.3 Establishing Quality Assurance Mechanism.** The quality assurance team was also established to monitor and evaluate the success of the Program. During the course of the students' stay abroad, the College Faculty Board acted as a quality assurance team, and the College English Immersion proposal was validated by the

Faculty Validation and Monitoring Committee. The quality assurance mechanism was a four-part system the team developed.

1. A team of academic staff members was appointed to oversee the overall planning and implementation of the Program. The director and internationalization team worked closely with the partner universities to ensure that the implementation of the community projects as arranged by the partner institutions was well in place.
2. The quality assurance team established methods to evaluate and monitor the running of the English Immersion scheme. The committee provided a report informing the Faculty Board about the running and quality assurance of the Program.
3. Before the Program started, all participating students were required to fill in a pre-departure study plan, attend two briefing sessions, and sign a contract promising that they would fully take part in all aspects of the English Immersion Scheme.
4. The quality of the English Immersion assessment is based on the students' journal reflection papers, which comprised the student's reflective learning diary and reflective learning blog, self-reflection reports in the post-trip questionnaire, and individual student assessment reports submitted by the partner institution.

**4.1.4 Arranging Pre-departure Workshops and Logistics.** All participating students were required to attend two briefing sessions. The first briefing session was conducted by the director of internationalization and the internationalization team. In this briefing, students learned what they were expected to gain from the EI scheme and their responsibilities (e.g., submission of blogs). The second briefing workshop, conducted by the Dean of students, focusing on the skills of self-reflection involved in writing the blogs.

**4.1.5 Collecting Pre-trip Questionnaires.** The purpose of the pre-trip questionnaire allowed students to prepare themselves through development of a study plan. The pre-trip questionnaires consisted of four parts: (a) the importance of the participants' achieving the four intended learning outcomes in the area of enhancing language and communication competencies, and cultural awareness; (b) What the participants would do to achieve the intended learning outcomes; (c) What the participants could do to show their improvement after the return of the overseas' study; and (d) self-reported competency levels of their spoken English.

## **4.2 Stage 2: During the Implementation of the Program**

Stage 2 refers to the implementation of the program and middle-course monitoring work to assure the quality of the Program could be maintained and for further evaluation after the completion of the Program. During the course of Program implementation period, several in-and-out of classroom activities were assigned to students so that they could not only learn English language in class, but also could interact with the local native English-speaking people of the host countries to learn

colloquial expressions and experience local cultures. The major activities consist of (1) tailor-made language sessions, (2) lessons in research and community projects, (3) lessons about host society culture and cultural excursion, and (4) homestay experience.

**4.2.1 Tailor-made Language Sessions.** Tailor-made language activities intended to enable students to: (a) learn native-like pronunciation; (b) improve listening comprehension; (c) learn native colloquial expressions; and (d) develop interactive communication skills. The language learning activities included scheduled classes and practical language activity sessions to improve English language proficiency. Student participants attended 16 to 20 hours of specially designed language instruction per week.

**4.2.2 Community projects and research projects.** Students were also required to work on projects under the supervision of local tutors and make contact with the local communities in the afternoons and in their spare time. Through their involvement in the community projects, students gained an understanding of their local communities while applying their classroom-learned language skills to execute the project. The thrust of the community and research projects allowed students to (a) practice communication skills, (b) gain first-hand experience of interacting with locals, (c) explore different cultures and lifestyles, and (d) compare Hong Kong cultural values with foreign values.

**4.2.3 Cultural excursions and social gatherings.** Aside from two types of formalized academic activities, the host universities also arranged cultural excursions and social gatherings that allowed students to experience first-hand intercultural interactions. Students experienced authentic cultural aspects of the host country by visiting interesting historical places and museums, and by participating in cultural activities. Participating in cultural visits allowed students not only to experience fully the target culture, but also to enhance their ability to appreciate the target culture. More specifically, the cultural excursions and social gatherings enabled students to (a) learn foreign culture and history in a more interesting way, (b) meet international students from all over the world, (c) widen their cultural horizons, and (d) improve intercultural, social, and communication skills. The activities for cultural excursions were built in as part of the academic curriculum, inasmuch as the students received briefings before the excursions, and they also engaged in debriefings after the excursions by submitting two-page summary reports and in-class discussions.

**4.2.4 Homestay Arrangements.** Homestay accommodation was found for all of the participating students in local homes, where students interacted with local residents and families on a daily basis, learning conversational skills, social skills, and cultural awareness. Through constant interaction on a daily basis, the students learned about the life-style and local culture. Living with an English-speaking host family enabled students to (a) have constant daily interactions, (b) improve their English communication skills and vocabulary, and (c) experience the local lifestyle and culture. This experience was designed to enhance not only their English communication skills, but also expose them to the local culture.

In addition to the formalized academic curriculum, in Stage 2, to ensure the smooth running of the Program, at the end of week 2, all of the partner universities were required to submit progress reports, in which the host universities evaluated the four components of the Program curriculum design and provided feedback to individual students on their learning. The purpose of the mid-course progress report was to identify any discrepancies and difficulties that might exist. The progress reports intend to show whether the Program was progressing as planned, and the students were generally working to a good standard.

### **4.3 Stage 3: Post-trip Debriefing**

The Program did not end after the students' return to Hong Kong. To assess the effectiveness of the Program, post-trip debriefings were an essential component in learning (see for example, Barker & Jensen, 1997; Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2000). The debriefing activities provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their overseas experience, share their experience with peers, and learn from other participants. Reflecting on their experiences of interacting with locals, according to comments from the participating students, led the participants into deeper learning (Biggs & Watkins, 1996) and allowed students to share their insights with each other and compare their overseas learning experiences with peers who went to different universities and countries. Importantly, the debriefing achieved closure on their immersion experience.

To allow students to reflect upon and share their overseas experiences, the debriefings took three forms; a post-trip questionnaire; a forum and exhibition, and a post-trip debriefing workshop. In this section, the three types of debriefing activities are discussed.

**4.3.1 Post-trip questionnaires.** Two weeks after the students returned to Hong Kong, student were required to complete a post- trip questionnaire. The purpose of the post-trip questionnaire is to enable participants to reflect on and compare their achievements with the study plan they set before the Program. The post-trip questionnaire data also provided additional texture and insights, and focused on six components: (a) assessing the degree to which students achieved their previously set intended learning outcomes in language enhancement and cultural awareness, (b) engaging in reflection upon their learning activities as they were aligned with the intended learning outcomes, (c) explaining what they did to achieve their goals, (d) self-reporting on their improvement of their spoken English proficiency, (e) describing their plans for future and continual learning, and (f) writing a 500-word self-reflection learning report.

**4.3.2 Post-trip debriefing forum.** The purpose of the post-trip debriefing forum was twofold. The first purpose was to showcase the Program through an Exhibition and a formalized event. To supplement this function, there was an informative exhibition where selected students' work, including blogs, reflective learning journals, and research/community projects, was presented. The exhibition reflected the progress of their learning during the course of the Program. In addition, photos were exhibited to document the different lifestyles they experienced. In total, 24

colorful panels were displayed for a week. The second purpose was to provide a platform for students to share their experiences, and thereby foster greater cultural awareness within the university campus. At the Forum, representative students from each of the four partner universities made short presentations, in which they shared their memorable and inspiring study abroad experiences.

**4.3.3 Debriefing workshop on reflection of students' study abroad experiences.** To provide background information prior to the debriefing workshop session, the Part F sections of the Post-trip questionnaires, the reflections on overall learning, were sent to the workshop moderator four days before the debriefing workshop. The responses to the post-trip questionnaire provided the structure for the workshop discussion. The purpose of the debriefing workshop allowed students to reflect on their experiences and to write a reflective journal. The post-trip debriefing workshop lasted for 1.5 hours.

## **5. Research Methodology**

### **5.1 Participants**

This initiative was offered to a group of undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences in a Hong Kong tertiary institution. The present study examines the effects of a four-week short-term study abroad program from the culture and language perspectives. This study abroad experience featured pre-departure preparation to establish a foundation of knowledge and the expectations. In total, 85 students were chosen to participate in the program. All of the participants were the first and the second-year undergraduate students who were under the University Grants Council (UGC) funded full-time students with a minimum CGPA score of 2.5 or above.

### **5.2 Data Collection and Measurements**

The learning impact of the Program was assessed by comparing pre- and posttrip questionnaires to determine whether changes were observed. The quantitative measures were the data derived from three sets of the questionnaires. All students were asked to fill in three sets of questionnaires before and after the trip. These questionnaires include the pre-trip questionnaire, post-trip questionnaire and pre-debriefing questionnaire. The latter two were filled in upon the completion of Program.

For the pre-trip questionnaire, students were asked to rate the importance of five learning objectives on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 indicates not important and 5 indicates very important). Three of the five intended learning outcomes (ILOs) are language learning objectives, and the other two are related to culture. For examples, in the language perspective of the learning objectives, students were asked to rate the importance of the ability to identify their own language learning needs and design language learning plans appropriate for authentic language settings such as living in a home stay environment and doing volunteer work in the trip. As for the cultural perspective, they were asked to rate the perceived degree of importance in

terms of the ability to demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of nationalities, foreign cultures and different value systems.

The post-trip questionnaire focused on the extent to which students felt that they have achieved the five learning objectives on the same 5-point Likert scale. The purpose of collecting both pre-trip and post-trip questionnaires is to compare and determine the extent to which the Program contributed to the student learning. In addition, the students were required to fill in a pre-debriefing questionnaire after the trip. The purpose of the pre-debriefing questionnaire is to examine the degree of students' preference for and enjoyment in different learning activities by ranking on a 5-point Likert scale (1 indicates least enjoyable/preferable and 5 indicates most enjoyable/preferable).

To investigate the effectiveness of Program on language and intercultural competence, descriptive statistical analysis, Pearson Correlation Test and ANOVA Test were employed. Using these two non-descriptive statistical tests, statistical significance, mean differences and strength of correlations between variables can be found out.

## **6. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Program**

To assess the effectiveness of the culture and language immersion program, both quantitative and qualitative measurements were employed. The collected data, both quantitative and qualitative, allowed the researcher to track the overall learning of the students by rating the effectiveness of the various educational and social-cultural activities in which the students were engaged in an English-speaking country. In this section, I first compare pre- and post-trip questionnaires that measure students' perceived improvements in English competence and cultural enhancement. Second, I report the Program Effectiveness. I then summarize and highlight program evaluation from partner universities. The assessments of the two independent consultants were also discussed.

### **6.1 Overall Comparisons of Pre-trip and Post-trip Questionnaires**

To assess the differences, I compare pre-and post- trip questionnaires that measure the perception of English language competency and confidence levels of students (ILOs 1,2,and 3) as well as a better understanding of intercultural difference between Hong Kong and the overseas country (ILO 4 and 5). The result shows that over 90% of the students rated themselves 4 and 5 on a five-point Likert scale, indicating that after the Program they were able to describe the cultural differences between Hong Kong and the country they went to (i.e., UK, US, or Australia), as compared with only 80% who rated themselves 4 and 5 in the pre-trip questionnaire. The results also show that the students not only felt the importance of being able to demonstrate an understanding and an appreciation of the target culture, but they also felt they were able to interact appropriately with individuals from different cultures.

As for the language, in the pre-trip questionnaire, 87% of the students rated 4 or 5, indicating that they valued their ability to identify their language learning needs. However, the results do not coincide with their self-reported achievement on the use

of idiomatic expressions in their post-trip questionnaire, in which only 60% of students rated either 4 or 5 on being able to identify and practice idiomatic expressions with host families and the locals. Nonetheless, 83% of the students indicated that they were able to use English better than before when communicating in real life situations, especially when interacting with native-English speakers.

**6.1.1 Pre-and posttrip questionnaires measuring the perception of English language competency and confidence levels.**

To measure the effectiveness of the Program from the language perspective, the students were asked to self-assess their spoken English proficiency on a 5-point Likert scale. Ten sub-questions were developed to systematically evaluate their confidence level in spoken English (see Table 1). To measure difference, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Pearson Correlation Coefficient were performed. The result of ANOVA shows that there is a significant difference in mean scores of the overall self-assessed English oral proficiency before and after the Program (Mean Scores = 3.04 and 3.65 respectively,  $t = 8.776$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). This finding indicates that students feel more confident in communicating with native-English speakers after having participated in the Program. The result of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient is consistent with the ANOVA result, indicating that students who rated their English oral proficiency high before the Program also showed high confidence in their use of spoken English. The result of the Pearson Correlation Co-efficient shows strong correlation ( $r = .476$ ) with statistical significance at 0.01 level (see also Table 1 for the correlation of individual item).

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Pre-and Posttrip Self-Assessed Spoken English Proficiency

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Self-Assessed Spoken English Proficiency</i>
1. I speak fluent English as if it were my mother tongue.	.190
2. I can convey my ideas and state my points clearly in English.	.349**
3. My utterances in English can be understood by native-English speakers.	.279*
4. When communicating in English, I am generally calm and relaxed.	.303*
5. In general, communicating with native English-speakers makes me uncomfortable.	-.186
6. I can express myself better when talking to non-native English speakers in English than to native English speakers. (For example, talking to French/ Japanese in English).	-.009
7. Generally, I feel nervous when I have to participate in English meetings.	-.267*

8. I am self-conscious when I am called upon to answer questions at English meetings.	-.221*
9. When participating in in-class discussions in English, I feel as comfortable as I would if I were using Cantonese/my native language to express my viewpoints.	.78
10. Overall comment on my proficiency in spoken English.	.476**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

It is interesting to note that students who rated themselves high in their overall spoken English proficiency in the pre-trip questionnaire also rated themselves high in speaking English as fluently as if it were their mother tongue ( $r = .403^{**}$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). These students, however, did not feel that they spoke fluent English as if it were their mother tongue ( $r = .190$ ) even though they still felt their overall spoken English proficiency was high. The reason for such a perception difference can be that students were aware of the variations in English and accents, which never came across when they were studying in Hong Kong.

### **6.1.2 Pre-and posttrip questionnaires revealing a better understanding of cultural differences.**

To assess the impact of Program on culture learning, the comparison was made between the self-perceived importance of being able to explain the cultural differences and the self-reported ability to describe the differences between the two cultures, along with their actual reported behaviors towards individuals from different cultures. The result of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient shows that students who perceived the importance of demonstrating a better understanding of intercultural differences also rated high in indicating that they were able to describe the differences of the two cultures ( $r = 2.99$ ,  $p < .006$ ), and that they were able to interact properly with individuals from different cultural backgrounds ( $r = .618$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The findings reveal that the Program not only broadens students horizons and enhances their cultural awareness, but also the student was able to conduct field research, write a report, and compare the different systems in a chosen topic, such as education, political system, and life styles.

## **6.2 Evaluation of Program Curriculum Effectiveness**

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Program curriculum design, students were required to rate their degree of preference for four aspects of the curriculum design, and indicate the extent to which they enjoyed the curriculum components as implemented by the host universities. Table 2 summarizes the mean scores of students' responses concerning their preferences and enjoyment of each aspect of the curriculum.



Table 2 shows that students preferred cultural excursion and their homestay the most, followed by culture and society lessons.

Table 2: A Comparison of Degree of Preference and Enjoyment towards Program Curriculum

Description	Preference	Enjoyment
Academic Learning (Four Language Skills)	2.44	3.05
Culture and Society	3.54	3.93
Research/Community Project	2.35	3.36
Cultural Excursions	4.47	4.31

Table 2 shows that students preferred the formal language classes and research projects the least. The comparatively low mean scores for the academic learning (i.e., four-language lessons and research projects) is likely due to their perception that academic skills can be obtained in Hong Kong. Such a discrepancy can also be due to their perception that the Program is an out-of-classroom co-curriculum activity, and thus the learning should be fun and informal. Although most of the students did not enjoy the research/community projects component of the curriculum, they felt that the research/community projects were as effective as the cultural excursions and homestays in helping them better understand the target culture (see Table 3).

Table 3. A Comparison of Three Aspects of Curriculum Design for Learning about the Host Culture

Variables	Cultural Excursion	Research/Community projects	Homestay
Effectiveness as compared to other curriculum aspects	3.93	3.05	4.26
Providing a better understanding of host culture	4.26	3.47	4.18

To further examine the relationships of students' preferences and their enjoyment of the curriculum in the four aspects of the curriculum design, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was performed, and the relevant relationships are reported below.

***The relationship of enjoying academic communication (AC) skills lessons with other variables.*** The students who enjoyed AC skills lessons were inclined to enjoy culture and society lessons ( $r = 2.72^*$ ) and research/community project activities ( $r = .294^{**}$ ). These students also tended to think that academic communication skills helped them better understand the target culture ( $r = .268^*$ ).

***The relationship of enjoying culture and society lessons with other variables.*** Students who enjoyed culture and society lessons also enjoyed the components of the research/community projects ( $r = .466^{**}$ ), cultural excursions ( $r = .646^{**}$ ) and the homestay ( $.523^{**}$ ).

***The relationship of enjoying the research/community projects activities with other variables.*** Students who enjoyed research/community project activities not only also enjoyed the cultural excursions ( $r = .646^{**}$ ), and also the homestay ( $r = .523^{**}$ ), but in addition, they considered that these activities helped them better understand the target culture ( $r = .378^{**}$ ).

***The relationship of enjoying cultural excursions with other variables.*** Students who rated high in cultural excursion also gave a higher rating to the culture-related aspects of the curriculum design. The cultural excursion are positively correlated with culture and society lessons ( $r = .646^{**}$ ), research/community project ( $r = .302^*$ ), and homestay ( $r = .698^{**}$ ), indicating that these individuals enjoyed culture and society lessons, the research/community projects, and the homestay. Furthermore, these students considered that cultural excursions activities provided them with a better understanding of their host culture.

***The relationship of enjoying the homestay with other variables.*** Students who enjoyed the homestay had positive attitudes towards culture-related curriculum activities, such as culture and society lessons ( $r = .523^*$ ) and cultural excursions ( $r = .698^{**}$ ). The students who valued the homestay experience also thought that the homestay helped them better understand the target culture ( $r = .513^{**}$ ).

### **6.3 Overall Assessment of the Program Effectiveness by Partner Universities**

Another aspect of the assessments of the Program effectiveness were based on the final reports provided by the partner institutions in accordance with the five strands of the Program curriculum design. As agreed, the partner universities provided progress reports (by the end of the third week) that monitored students' mid-term performances. At the end of the Program, in addition to the individual student assessment reports, a final report was also provided by the participating institutions for evaluation. The end of program reports focused on describing and evaluating the Program. The reports included feedback from teachers, staff, students, program directors of the partner universities. The evaluation of the Program effectiveness emphasized to the extent to which the program objectives were achieved from the curriculum design and pedagogical perspectives. In this section, I summarize the program curriculum design and highlight the observations and evaluations made by the partner universities. The program curriculum was divided into five strands, and they are: Everyday Communication Skills; Academic Communication Skills; Issues in Culture and Society; Research Project and Community Project.

***Everyday Communication Skills.*** In the first week of the program, the students were involved in a series of lessons dedicated to ensuring they had access to the necessary phrases and expressions to enable them to participate in everyday conversation with native speakers. There was a specific emphasis on host family conversations, and time was dedicated to ensuring that students were made aware of the need to use specific phrases, vocabulary and expressions that communicated their message effectively, while observing cultural codes of politeness and respect. As observed by the classroom teachers, overall, there was a definite improvement in the range and accuracy of language being used. Particularly, quieter students also started joining in more confidently.

***Academic Communication Skills.*** The Academic Communication Skills strand was designed to enable students to deliver an effective presentation in the final week and to be able to take part in the seminar discussion. After each input session, students were given a scenario to enable them to put the learned language

and sentence structures into practice. One partner university commented that “In feedback with the students, it became clear that while they were very proficient at giving presentations or delivering pre-prepared speeches, students felt they needed more practice at producing more spontaneous language. These types of activities, debates and discussions, required students to listen attentively to challenging questions and then deliver a strong, convincing reply immediately.” Comments from tutors reveal that “At the beginning of the course the students were very confident with their discussions skills. However, they had a narrow range of simple phrases and were largely unable to effectively manage the wide variety of functions that are required in academia.” The Program Director of a partner university commented that “To some extent all the students were able to show an increase in their own production skills and confidence in understanding why others were using specific language even if they were not able to themselves.”

**Research Project.** The research project involved students gathering data on the topic of their choice through interaction with local people. Students worked in small groups and cooperated in all parts of the task. According to partner universities, “the students generally chose very interesting topics which lead to them gaining a much deeper understanding of host/target culture and developed their ability to compare and contrast cultural norms objectively”. Through the data collection stage, the students were able to interact with local people concerning topics which inspired a good level of communication and exchange of ideas. As commented by all partner universities, the research project strand “proved an interesting and communicative experience for all students and enabled them to discuss and clarify ideas on the topics in question”. Classroom teachers also commented that “there was a remarkable difference from week one in terms of language being used from more simple functions, e.g. interrupting, to the more complex, e.g. seeking clarification, expressing doubt, accepting a view and offering one’s own.” As observed, most students had moved on from basic phrases, to having the confidence to use a greater range with a higher level of sophistication and complexity.

**Issues in Culture and Society.** During these sessions, students were given the opportunity to meet and study with on-campus international students coming from around the world. The newly formed student groups were introduced to host culture through a variety of topics such as: newspapers, education, young people, invaders, icons and TV shows. This activity provided the students with ample opportunity to use the language they had learnt in the Academic Communication Skills strand. In so doing, the students became familiarized with the different accents and cultural backgrounds of the international students.

**Community Project.** The Community Project was designed to enable students to interact with members of the wider community. Students were asked to prepare a presentation on some aspect of life in Hong Kong. The community project enabled students to really get to know the young people in their respective environment. As commented by the Program Director of a partner university, “the two community visits were a success. Students had well organized program activities ranging from

teaching the children some greetings, to cooking rice balls, tasting tea, Fai Chun, using chop sticks and knot tying”. Positive feedback also came from community project leaders commenting on students’ performance by stating that “I will never forget this experience”.

**Cultural Excursions.** Two cultural excursion trips were arranged. In preparation for both trips, one lesson was dedicated to giving the students information about the visit and encouraging them to plan their time there to ensure they were able to see everything that interested them. The following morning sessions were then dedicated to trip feedback, where students had the opportunity to share their experiences, discuss aspects of the visit they found most enjoyable, to remember the most important information about the town or museum and to test each other’s knowledge. As reflected, students enjoyed gaining cultural knowledge about everyday life through cultural excursions.

The overall assessments of the Program effectiveness from the partner universities have shown that the Program objectives were achieved in that students were able to:

1. Communicate in English with increased confidence with particular emphasis on pronunciation and use of the English language for academic purposes.
2. Demonstrate a greater awareness of, and empathy towards, the target culture.
3. Demonstrate a better understanding of intercultural differences between Hong Kong and the host country.
4. Apply language learning strategies and cross-cultural communicative skills for use in a cross-cultural environment.

#### **6.4 Overall Assessment of the Program Effectiveness by Two Independent Consultants**

Two consultants were employed to provide independent assessment service. The scope of their service included: (1) editing and providing comments on the blogs and reflective journals submitted by the students, (2) evaluating the overall success of the Program by providing an objective validation, and providing a professional perspective on the viability of the culture and language immersion program.

Three weeks after the Program was over, the independent consultants submitted their consulting reports commenting on the overall effectiveness of the Program. The consulting reports focused on (1) whether the Program objectives were achieved and (2) the recommendations for the future running of the culture and language immersion program. As a whole, the consultants commented that the learning objectives were met and the success of the Program was laid in thoughtful planning and organization of the Program that enabled the participating students to have a memorable and meaningful experience in an unfamiliar culture. Generally speaking, all of the participating students indicated their homestay was a meaningful aspect of their immersion experience. The consultants also commented the effectiveness of the Program from language and cultural perspectives. In the next, I summarize the observations of the consultants from these to perspectives.

**Language Use.** In examining students' post-trip questionnaires, the consultants observed that nearly all participating students reported an improvement in their confidence and in their listening and speaking skills from the perspective of the spoken English. To enhance the English language competence, many students shared their successful strategies in learning the language. These strategies included: planning what to say before beginning speech, listening for key words, asking for repetitions when they did not understand, and reflecting on successes and failures after they had taken place to see how to improve their learning.

Through the reading of students' blog submission, the consultants promptly reviewed their blogs with corrections to the English and comments on grammar and word choice. However, the consultants observed that "the students' writing did not seem to benefit from this feedback." The students persisted in errors. This observation reflects an important key issue in that it takes longer time to improve the written language proficiency and that four-week culture and language immersion program may not be long enough to make a significant difference in terms of language enhancement.

**Cultural Adaptation.** Gathering from the reflective reports, the consultants concluded that all of the participating students learned cultural adaptation skills and that they were satisfied with the knowledge they gathered of the cultures where they lived. The homestay was, in many ways, the heart of the experience and contributed to the success of the cultural adaptation. The consultants further commented that although students felt that they have improved a great deal in cultural adaptation, "the students struggled to find ways to explain cultural differences, and ways to identify the cultural dimensions behind unfamiliar behaviour." For example, "They (students) were not able to distinguish cultural differences from differences related to physical and economic contexts".

Five general observations from the two consultants are as follows:

1. Students overwhelmingly reported their satisfaction with their improved confidence in speaking English and their improved language skills and cultural adaptation.
2. The academic program provided multiple learning elements that enabled students to improve their language skills.
3. Written language in the blogs did not improve over the four-week stay as much as it could have, had the edited blogs become part of their instruction and learning opportunity.
4. Through the interaction with tutors, international students, and homestay families, the EI participants learned cultural adaptation skills.
5. Organized outings, social events, guest lectures, research projects, and community service projects enabled the students to learn about the host culture.

## **7. Conclusion**

The current study describes a four-week culture and language immersion program and evaluates its effectiveness from the perspectives of various stakeholders. The

Program was designed, quality-assessed, implemented, monitored and evaluated thoroughly, and provides groundwork for future similar type of short-term culture and language immersion programs.

Findings suggest that students undergo changes in their views and perceptions as a consequence of participating in a four-week culture and language immersion program, and that the programs can have an important impact on enhancing their intercultural competence and language learning. Given the little empirical research that has been systematically examined the impact of the short-term culture and language program on improving language proficiency and culture competence, findings of the current study can be reassuring and shed a light in exploring the impact of short-term study abroad programs. Overall, the participating students found the immersion experience was rewarding. There is no doubt that there are clear educational benefits that the culture and language immersion programs not only improve language proficiency but also enhance the intercultural competence.

In sum, the 4-week short-term culture and language immersion program achieved all its learning objectives. By all measures, the students experienced increased confidence in using English, demonstrated a greater awareness of culture, were able to identify and explain cultural differences between Hong Kong and the host culture, and learned to apply language learning strategies and to begin to develop intercultural communication skills.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Findings of the current study have several implications for future research. Three important issues are emerged. The first issue is about the criteria in determining who chooses to participate in study abroad. When assessing the impact of short-term study abroad program from the language perspective, it becomes clear and critical to determine the minimal language requirement in order to make a difference within a short period of time. The second issue is about preexisting attitudes towards host culture and importance of intercultural or global attitudes (see, for example, Kim and Goldstein, 2005). The third issue is whether the short-term gains guarantee the long-term effect.

The current study examined the impact of a four-week short-term culture and language immersion program based on measures developed around a set of learning objectives in relation to the improvement of the language proficiency and the enhancement of intercultural competence. Although the results of the study have revealed desirable outcomes, the measurements were taken shortly after the Program was over. It can be arguable whether this impact permanent? If short-term culture and language immersion program will become a trend for promoting the enhancement of language and cultural competence, a better understanding of long-term impact is essential. In this connection, only longitudinal research design can address the concern of whether short-term immersion program can lead to long-term effect. In so doing, the future research on the long-term impact of the culture and language programs may need to consider taking a longitudinal, ethnographic

research method to trace the changes towards language and culture over a period of two years, four years, or perhaps even longer time period.

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