SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

An Empirical Study on Individual Differences of Chinese Students at Hungarian Universities:
English Learning Motivation, Strategies and Autonomy in a Study-Abroad Context

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1. Research background

Individual differences are widely acknowledged as significant variables in the success of foreign language acquisition (Kidd et al., 2018; Henter, 2014; Dörnyei, 2006; Ellis, 1994; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993; Skehan, 1991; Genesee & Hamayan, 1980), especially language learning motivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015; Kálmán & Gutierrez Eugenio, 2015; Ushioda, 2014; Dörnyei, 1994; Gardner, 2007), learning strategies (Habók & Magyar, 2018; Oxford, 2011; Wong & Nunan, 2011; Griffiths, 2008; Oxford, 1989; Rubin, 1975), and autonomy (Tran & Duong, 2018; Ou, 2017; Benson, 2013; Wenden, 1998; Littlewood, 1996). Additionally, the study abroad (SA) context is also understood as an important factor for the promotion of language success (Goldoni, 2013; Kinginger, 2011; DeKeyser, 2007; Freed, 1998), in particular because of a greater amount of language contact than in the at-home context (Cigliana & Serrano, 2016; Magnan & Bake, 2007). However, in recent years an increasing number of Chinese students have begun to study abroad in contexts where English is not used as a target language but as a lingua franca or medium of instruction. Nevertheless, the individual difference research in this context, particularly in terms of Chinese participants, has been very rare (Llanes et al., 2016). Until now, research has been mainly carried out on studying language varieties of English as Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer, 2006; Schneider, 2007; Sung, 2014; Gao & Xu, 2015). There are very few studies on ID factors in SA contexts where English is not a native language but a lingua franca (Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Naghdipour; 2014); studies on Chinese participants in this kind of context are even fewer. In view of this domain, identifying the characteristics of the individual differences in English learning among Chinese students in this context is my main research interest. Therefore, the present research is aimed at filling this gap. Hence, researching this group of Chinese participants would provide important findings in the field of Individual Difference (ID) research.
2. Research objectives

In order to explore how Chinese students in Hungary characterize their individual differences in learning English in a study abroad context where English is used as medium of instruction, I proposed the five specific research questions: (1) What characterizes Chinese students in Hungary in terms of their overall strategies use, motivation types and intensity, autonomous learning behaviors, and language contact? (2) Are there any differences between genders, degree levels, lengths of stay in Hungary, majors, and proficiency levels of Chinese students in Hungary in terms of their English learning motivation, strategy use, autonomy, and L2 contact? (3) What are the relationships among the motivations, strategies, autonomy, and L2 contact for this group of students? (4) How do individual difference factors affect English learning efforts and perceived English proficiency? (5) How do motivation and strategy use dynamically change before and after coming to study abroad in Hungary?

3. Research structure

This dissertation is composed of five chapters in total. Chapter 1 is the introduction of the study, in which the rationale of the study, research purposes, and the outline of the study are stated respectively. Chapter 2 is the literature review, in which the relevant definitions, theories, frameworks and previous empirical studies are systematically summarized and synthesized. Specifically, I will begin by reviewing individual difference variables, (the motivation, strategies and autonomy), in terms of their definitions, theories and related previous studies involving Chinese participants. Second, I review the research into the study abroad context. Third, I review the previous studies on motivation, strategy and autonomy in a study abroad context. Chapter 3 is the methodology section, in which I elaborate on the research methods applied in this project, including the research context, overall research design, pilot study on instruments, as well as quantitative and qualitative study procedures. Chapter 4 is the main body of this dissertation, which makes a detailed presentation of research results.
and findings, accompanied by the discussions and interpretation of the results according to the sequence of the research questions. Chapter 5 will conclude the dissertation by summarizing the main findings of this research, proposes the pedagogical implications from this study, pinpoints the limitations, and recommends suggestions for future research.

4. Research methods

In order to achieve the proposed objectives of the study, I designed two relatively separate empirical studies: Study One and Study Two. For the purpose of answering research questions 1 to 4 by means of quantitative methods, I intended to investigate the actual individual differences of the subjects based on the data collected from the self-reported questionnaires. Meanwhile, with the aim of answering research question 5, through the qualitative method of semi-structured retrospective interviews, I attempted to explore the dynamic characteristics of participants’ motivation, strategies and learning experience.

4.1 Quantitative study

First, the research instruments were designed based on the relevant theories in the reviewed literature; then, a pilot study was conducted to measure the reliability of the questionnaire instruments and interview questions; after the piloting of the instrument, the finalized version of the questionnaire consists of five main sections: motivation, strategy, autonomy, language contact and background information. Except for the background information part, all the other four parts were surveyed in the form of a five-point Likert scale. The first part, motivation investigation, consisted of two main constructs: the L2 self-system and motivation types of Chinese students in Hungary, and two sub-scales: efforts and attitudes to learn English, making up 45 items in total. The second part, strategy investigation, consisted of six strategies: memory, cognitive, compensate, metacognitive, social and affective, all together 26 items. The third part, autonomous behavior, consists of three constructs: individual learning behavior,
academic learning behavior and social learning behavior, all together 12 items. The fourth part, L2 contact, consists of four scales: direct spoken contact, direct written contact, media contact, and Chinese contact, all together 20 items.

The research population of the current dissertation is Chinese students in Hungary, who are pursuing their programs in English at different degree levels. For the purpose of making the sampling more representative, and fully reflecting the individual differences of the target population of Chinese students in Hungary, I tried to include sampling of Chinese students in all different programs, from different universities, different years of stay, and different levels of degree. An online questionnaire was designed and sent the link to the participants. In order to collect as much data as possible, the convenience sampling and snowball sampling were adopted. In total, around 300 questionnaires were sent out, and the data collection lasted three weeks; finally, 160 valid questionnaires were collected.

When the data collection finished, I conducted the data analysis by using the following statistical methods: (1) scale reliability analysis was checked for the consistent reliability of each scale of the instrument. (2) descriptive analysis was used to display the frequency of each variable. (3) A T-test was used to compare the differences between two groups of variables. (4) ANOVA was used to compare the differences between more than two groups of variables. (5) correlation analysis was used to explore the relationship between variables. (6) regression analysis was used to predict the factors affecting the variables.

4.2 Qualitative study

The qualitative study was carried out to acquire information through conducting face-to-face discussions with the selected participants based on the outline of the interview questions, so as to trace the learners learning experiences through semi-structured interviews, which could make up for the shortcomings of quantitative study.

The interview guide contains 30 questions in total, comprising four parts. In the first part, the participants will be asked some lead-in questions regarding their general
background information and English learning experience in the past and present. In the second part, I will concentrate on asking the participants how they studied and are studying English about their previous and present English learning strategies. In the third part, I will focus on the motivation and reasons why the participants studied English in China and why do they continue to study now, so as to find out the dynamic changes in motivation after coming to Hungary. In the fourth part, I will try to learn about students’ learning experience in a study abroad context in Hungary, particularly about their language interaction and language contact, so as to probe into what factors affect students’ motivation, strategies and autonomy.

In the questionnaire, the last item asked the participants whether or not they were willing to take part in an interview later. 13 students ticked yes and provided their contact email; therefore, one student was chosen to do a think aloud pilot for the interview questions, and 12 students were chosen as interviewees. The whole interview lasted around 50 to 60 minutes, depending on the interviewee. After the interview, the recording was transcribed in a MS Word file, and I coded the data and find the emergent themes.

5. Research findings

5.1 Main findings of RQ 1

The first research question was aimed at investigating the general characteristics of Chinese students’ English learning motivational dispositions, strategy preferences, autonomous learning behaviours, as well as English language contact at Hungarian universities in a study abroad context. The findings of this research indicate that generally speaking, Chinese students studying in Hungary show a very strong intensity of motivation not only in terms of the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience in the L2 Motivational self-system, but also in terms of the four motivation types of intrinsic interest, personal responsibility, information medium, and social responsibility. This finding gives partial support to You and Dörnyei’s (2014) finding
suggesting the generally favourable motivational disposition towards English learning. Moreover, the participants relatively frequently applied direct learning strategies and sometimes employ indirect strategies in learning English. The finding is still consistent with previous findings (Li, 2002), which imply that Chinese students prefer using memory, cognitive and compensatory strategies more than metacognitive, affective and social ones, but this finding is also partially consistent with Tam (2013), whose results suggest that memory strategy is the least often applied among Chinese students in the Hongkong context. Furthermore, the level of their autonomous learning behaviours is relatively high in the three aspects of academic, social, and individual settings. Unexpectedly, this finding is somewhat different from previous studies which indicated that Chinese students’ autonomous English learning was not very high. This might be due to the change of learning context from classroom-based at home to content-based abroad. The same reason might also be suitable for explaining the finding that Chinese students studying in Hungary seem to have more English contacts than Chinese one. The study abroad context makes the participants have more access to English in their daily study and lives. Finally, the perceived English proficiency among Chinese students generally showed intermediate-level English skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

5.2 Main findings of RQ 2

The second research question is targeted at comparing whether any differences existed across groups of different genders, different lengths of study abroad, different majors, different degree levels, and different levels of perceived English proficiency amongst the Chinese students in Hungary in terms of their English learning motivation, strategy use, autonomous behaviours, and language contact. Many novel findings were revealed from my study: Unexpectedly, gender was only related to the intrinsic interest aspect of motivational scales, which is proved by a previous study (Li et al., 2003; Guo, 2009); however, no difference was found between males and females in instrumental motivation types, learning strategies, autonomous learning behaviours, and language...
contact, which is inconsistent with previous studies (Si et al., 2005; Li, 2010; Li, 2006). This might be due to the difference in language proficiency and major programs between this study and the previous ones. Interestingly, the length of study abroad was related to personal development in motivation, autonomous learning behaviours in academic settings, and English contact with media; this finding implied that the students’ personal development motivation would fluctuate during stay abroad, which is proven by the interview data. Surprisingly, the finding revealed that students majoring in different programs have the different social responsibility motivation, memory strategy use, as well as the access to Chinese language, which suggests that Business-related students have stronger motivation towards social responsibility for promoting the Chinese culture; therefore, they would have more access to mother language in Hungary; while, Science and Engineering students do not prefer using rote memory strategy in learning English, perhaps because of their major influence on study habits. Importantly, the academic degrees were related to different scales of each variable, specifically, students in higher degree not only show the stronger motivational scales in the ideal L2 Self, personal development, and information medium; but also used strategies more often than lower degree in learning English, such as memory, cognitive, and social, which is in line with previous findings (Liu & Cha, 2010). In addition, the finding also implies that higher degree students display more autonomous behaviours in different settings (academic, social and individual), which supports the results of a previous study by Liu and Cha (2010). Furthermore, my new finding of this study suggested that higher degree students grasped more access to English contact via different aspects (speaking, writing and media) than lower ones. Significantly, high proficient students have more stronger ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience, which partly confirms Liu and Thompson’s (2018) findings; however, my new finding revealed that more proficient students study English not only for the purpose of intrinsic interest but also for the sake of the information medium, which gives partial support to Gao et al.’s (2003) findings in terms of intrinsic interest motivation types; however, the information medium showed a significant difference between different proficiency groups, which might be the effect of the ELF study-abroad context. Moreover, my
findings further support the previous results that highly proficient learners used strategies more frequently, displayed more autonomous learning behaviours in academic, social and individual settings, and gained more contact with the English language in terms of speaking, writing, and media, in the study abroad context (Cheng et al., 2003; Si et al. 2005; Guo & Zhou, 2007; Wen & Wang, 1996).

5.3 Main findings of RQ 3

The third research question was aimed to probe into the correlations among English learning motivation, strategy use, autonomous learning behaviours, and language contact of Chinese students studying in Hungary. Many findings related to correlations were revealed. With regards to the inner correlation of constructs in each variable, the results revealed that the scales of each variable showed the correlation with each other, which supported the previous arguments for the L2 Motivational Self System (Wei, 2013), Motivation Types (Gao et al., 2003), and strategies (Xu, 2008); however, I found inconsistent results with previous studies in terms of autonomous English learning (Yin & Han, 2014) and language contact (Kormos et al., 2014).

When it comes to correlations amongst ID variables, the findings could be summarized as follows: First, the finding suggested that even though the ideal L2 Self, ought-to L2 Self, and L2 learning experience were all positively correlated with efforts to learn English, the correlation between ought-to L2 self and efforts was stronger, which is somewhat different from Papi’s (2010) results suggesting that the relationship between ideal L2 self and efforts was stronger. Remarkably, my novel finding suggested that the strongest correlations existed between efforts with information medium and social responsibility, which implied that the more Chinese students are motivated by those two types of motivation, the more efforts they would invest into learning English in Hungary. Second, in regard to correlations between motivation and strategy use, my findings suggested that overall motivation scales were positively correlated with the strategies constructs; more importantly, the participants who had strong information medium and social responsibility would make frequent use of different kinds of
learning strategies such as memory, cognitive, social, and metacognitive strategies, which is not in accordance with Wang and Wu’s (2017) findings in terms of information medium with strategy use, perhaps due to the fact that using English as a medium is a vital motivating factor in Hungarian contexts. Third, concerning the correlation between motivation and autonomous learning, the findings suggested that generally motivation significantly correlated with autonomous learning among this sample; particularly, the participants who had a strong sense of the ideal L2 self appear to study English more autonomously. Interestingly, in this research, my finding also suggested that those who possess strong motivation to learn English as an information medium and for social responsibility have more autonomous behaviors in learning English, which gives support to Ni’s (2010) findings showing that for Chinese students, instrumental motivation was more correlated with autonomy than the integrative one. Fourth, as for the relationship between motivation and language contact, my surprising results suggested that the ought-to L2 self and social responsibility motivation type are coincidently correlated with Chinese contact significantly, which perhaps implied that both the ought-to L2 self and social responsibility are related to expectations from others. It is worth noting that although there is a weak correlation between information medium and English contact, this motivation type correlated with all forms of English contacts. Sixth, when it comes to the correlations between strategy types and autonomous learning, the novel findings of the research implied that relatively autonomous learning behaviors had stronger correlations with Memory and Cognitive strategies in direct learning strategies and social and metacognitive in indirect strategies; moreover, social autonomous learning behaviors had the strongest correlation with social strategies among all correlations, which could be interpreted in a way that in the study abroad context, students have more opportunities to socialize with foreigners via English. Seventh, regarding the correlations between strategies and language contact, the interesting findings suggested that the strongest correlations existed between cognitive strategies and media contact, and social strategies and spoken contact, which is reasonable because reading English materials and watching English videos are all related to cognitive learning processing, and speaking English with foreigners is a kind
of socialization. Eighth, as regards the correlations between autonomous learning and language contact, the new findings indicated that English contacts in speaking, writing, and media are all correlated with autonomous learning behaviors in academic, social, and individual settings; comparatively, the correlations between autonomous learning behaviors and English contact are relatively stronger than those between English contact with other ID variables. Finally, as per the correlations between perceived English proficiency and ID variables, the findings revealed that generally speaking, the perceived English proficiency correlated with all individual difference factors, which mostly supported previous findings, for example, with the L2 self system (Ueki & Takeuchi, 2015), with strategy use (Wen & Wang, 1996; Jiang, 2003; Yuan et al., 2004; Shang & Wang, 2010; Liu, 2010), with autonomy (Wang, 2002; Wu & Zhang, 2009), and with L2 contact (Briggs, 2015; Magnan & Back, 2007; Trentman, 2017). Most importantly, my new finding reflected that perceived English proficiency had stronger correlations with autonomous learning behaviors and L2 contact than with motivation and strategies. This might be the reason why autonomous learning behaviors and English contact function more directly in the process of English learning.

5.4 Main findings of RQ 4

The fourth research question aimed to investigate in depth how ID variables affect English learning efforts and perceived English proficiency, and which scales of ID variables can significantly predict efforts and English proficiency in the model of path analysis. There appeared some expected findings, as well as some unexpected ones: First, when it comes to how motivation predicts English learning efforts, it was revealed that both motivational frameworks could predict the efforts paid to learn English amongst Chinese students in Hungary; to start with, the ideal L2 self, Ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience all significantly influence the efforts, which corresponded with previous findings (Li, 2014; Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Kormos & Csizér, 2008); however, the slightly different point from the previous studies was that in my research, the ought-to L2 self affected the effort to the strongest degree. As per motivation types,
the interesting findings suggested that only information medium and social responsibility contributed significantly to efforts to learn English. These findings indicated unique features regarding using English as an academic and lingua franca in non-English speaking countries.

Furthermore, when I subsequently conducted a path analysis of ID variables together predicting efforts in the model, the findings revealed that ought-to L2 self, metacognitive strategy, and autonomous learning behaviors in individual settings merged as influential predictor to English learning efforts in the model with Dörnyei’s L2 Self System included. What is more, the in-depth path analysis further revealed that metacognitive strategies were affected by affective, social, and memory strategies, which implied that self-regulating strategies were very important for the participants in SA context, and indirect strategies can work together to affect students’ effort to learn English. Moreover, the model with Chinese motivation types framework showed somewhat different results from Dörnyei’s model, which suggested that information medium and autonomous learning behaviors in academic settings turned out to be the significant contributors to predict English learning efforts. This finding implied that using English as medium of instruction in academic settings could contribute to students’ efforts to learn English. However, the subsequent path analysis further demonstrated that information medium motivation was further predicted by social responsibility, personal development and individual autonomous behaviors. The interesting findings suggested that two models with two motivational frameworks co-testify that Chinese students are more likely to be influenced to pay English learning efforts by instrumental-related motivation, either from expectations of their motherland or family, or from the pressure of learning their academic programs via English as academic lingua franca. Most importantly, the common ground in two models suggested autonomous learning behaviors in three settings merged as important predictors working together to contribute to Chinese students paying efforts to learn English in the study abroad context.

Second, with regards to how proficiency was respectively affected by the individual difference variables, the findings showed that as for Dörnyei’s motivational
self system, the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience significantly influenced English proficiency, which gave partial support to Liu and Thompson’s (2018) findings. Moreover, in Chinese motivation types framework, intrinsic interest and information medium could contribute to perceived English proficiency significantly; more importantly, information medium contributed to English proficiency at a stronger degree level. This finding implied that motivation to learn English as lingua franca in instruction and communication could indeed affect Chinese students’ English proficiency. As per strategy, only cognitive and social strategies could positively affect English proficiency, which is in agreement with previous findings (Yuan et al., 2004; Liu, 2010; Zhang et al., 2013); surprisingly, affective strategies negatively influenced perceived English proficiency, which perhaps suggested that using affective strategies means high English anxiety, which leads to low proficiency. The finding also suggested that only autonomous learning behaviors in social settings strongly affected English proficiency, which might be explained by the previous findings that social strategies seemed to be the most influential predictor of proficiency. The reason behind this might be that the participants mostly socialized with their teachers, peers and international friends. As for English contact scales, the findings indicated that English spoken contact and media contact could positively affect English proficiency in this context, which supports the findings of previous studies (Sigliana & Serrano, 2016; Trentman, 2017; Taguchi, 2008); interestingly, Chinese contact appears to negatively influence English proficiency.

Finally, when I subsequently conducted a path analysis of ID variables together predicting proficiency in the model, my unexpected findings reflected that in both models with Dörnyei’s Self System and motivation types framework, motivation and strategy use did not act as significant predictors affecting English proficiency; however, autonomous learning behaviors and language contact function as significant contributors influencing English proficiency. This finding might be understood in a way that students’ motivation and strategies are likely to be transformed into actual behaviors and actions in their autonomous learning and L2 contact. Surprisingly, social autonomous learning behaviors and media English contact merged as significant
predictors in the model. When I used these two scales as dependent variable, and others as independent variables, the in-depth path analysis further revealed that social autonomous learning behaviors were further affected by individual and academic autonomous learning behaviors, and media contact was further affected by English written and spoken contact respectively. These finding implied that in terms of actual English proficiency, the scales in either autonomous learning behaviors or language contact are more likely to work together to directly influence the improvement of English levels. Most importantly, social autonomous learning behaviors was also affected social strategies; in addition, media contact was also influenced by cognitive strategies. This implied that social strategies are the precondition for social autonomous learning behaviors, and reading materials from the internet means cognitive learning.

5.5 Main findings of RQ 5

The fifth research question aimed to trace Chinese students’ different English learning experiences between the at-home and study-abroad context. The findings from the qualitative data revealed the dynamic features of the individual difference factors of Chinese students studying at Hungarian universities. Overall, as far as the whole English learning experience is concerned, there indeed existed fluctuations in English learning motivations, English learning strategies, and learning autonomy. Specifically speaking, Chinese students were mainly motivated by the exam-oriented system to learn English in China whereas in Hungary, they are primarily motivated by their academic program studies to use English as medium of instruction in Hungary. It was agreed on among the participants that studying English-instructed programs would be more beneficial to improve students’ English language proficiency in the study abroad context than the exam-oriented motivation in the at-home context, because they felt that they integrated language learning with their major studies. In addition, when students went to Hungary, their motivation of cultural interest increased as well, due to the influence of more contact with foreigners and travelling in different European countries. Furthermore, the participants were found to use more English learning strategies in
Hungary than in China. Moreover, the Chinese students became more autonomous in English learning behaviors in the SA context than in the AH context. One more interesting finding was that those who started to learn English at a very early age were more inclined to have cultural interest motivation, and those who had a successful English experience in the past did not find much improvement in the ELF context because they felt they did not improve much while communicating with other non-English native speakers.

6. Research implication

In views of the above-mentioned results, I put forward the implications to future researchers, English learners, and English instructors. The research proposes a new perspective and area of research into individual difference in the settings of English-medium Instruction (EMI), Content-based Instruction (CBI), and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Therefore, for future research directions it would be recommended to conduct longitudinal research on comparative studies between ELF and ESL study abroad contexts in terms of individual difference variables.
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