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Learner perceptions of study abroad in China: facilitators of L2 Chinese language learning and the role of individual attributes

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While the number of Study Abroad (SA) students in China has increased, research on learners' perceptions of SA experiences in China has been underexplored. Therefore, this study examines L2 Chinese learners' perceptions of language learning facilitators during SA in China and the impacts of individual attributes (gender, proficiency, cultural background) on perceptions. A validated Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to 73 L2 Chinese learners from 22 countries, with factor analysis, nonparametric tests, and one-way ANOVAs used for data analysis. Results identified three core factors (explaining 54.937% of total variance): effective activities, supportive individuals, and key elements. Learners held more positive perceptions of the latter two more than activities. Inter-group difference analysis revealed that female learners exhibited greater recognition of most learning activities, high-level learners attached greater importance to learning opportunities and class instruction, and learners with Asian cultural backgrounds had higher recognition of language buddies. Overall, the findings demonstrate a target-oriented feature of learners' perceptions, emphasizing in-class instruction and instructed out-of-class activities, while questioning the role of cultural events. The results call for tailored adjustments for different learners in SA programs and underscore the impact of the target language and culture on L2 learners' perceptions. These findings provide empirical insights into the beneficial factors for language learning during SA, pointing to directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

cultural background, gender, L2 Chinese learners, learner perceptions, proficiency level, study abroad

Introduction

Studying abroad (SA) is widely regarded as one effective way to learn a foreign language (cf. Collentine and Freed, 2004; Houser and Bornais, 2023; Kinginger et al., 2018). The idea of SA as an ideal means for language learning has prevailed among teachers and learners from the 1960s through the mid-1990s (Allen, 2010). The growing interest in exploring gains from SA is rooted in the fact that SA provides the best and multiple opportunities for students to practice the target language (Alcon-Soler, 2014; Zalbidea et al., 2022). However, despite the extensive research on SA, there has been less focus on learners' perceptions regarding language learning—specifically, "what learners believe about language learning and what they believe about themselves as language learners" (Amuzie and Winke, 2009, p. 366).

Understanding learner perceptions and their effects is crucial in the context of SA, as they significantly influence language learning (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova, 2014). In the SA context, learners engage in a self-directed and independent approach to language acquisition. Therefore, learners' perceptions strongly shape their actions and decisions regarding whether

they can fully leverage SA's opportunities. Thus, exploring how learners view language learning in this context is essential to glean insights that can enhance their SA experience. Attention to learner perception and its effects is especially important for SA in China for two reasons. First, as the number of international students in China continues to grow—having reached 492,000 as early as 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019)—learners from diverse cultural backgrounds exhibit significant variations in their perceptions of language learning and study-abroad experiences. Second, language learning in China differs considerably from that in other countries, given the unique aspects of its language and culture, which is under-researched in the literature so far.

Thus, this study investigates international learners' perceptions of language learning during SA in China. It explores the beneficial factors that facilitate language acquisition from the learners' perspective, including effective activities, supportive individuals, and key elements that teachers and SA program designers may overlook but that play a significant role. While learner perception and beliefs are "rarely distinguished formally" in the literature (Wesely, 2012, p. 100), we stick to learner perception in this study—specifically, how learners perceive the beneficial factors of SA and how they see language learning from their perspectives.

Literature review

Research on SA has covered a range of methodologies, from large-scale analyses to smaller qualitative case studies. These studies focus on the effects of SA on linguistic outcomes and processes with key issues addressing the learning context and mechanisms, as well as learner and language development (Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau, 2009). From a broader perspective, existing research highlights the "challenging and rewarding" experiences and interactions that students encounter, along with "self-fulfilling personal and academic growth" (Cadd, 2012, p. 229). Collectively, these studies has revealed an emerging relationship between language learning and SA experience, particularly in the areas of the SA program setting, SLA issues during the SA, linguistic, pragmatic and intercultural gains, and the influence of individual variables (cf. Chen and Howard, 2024; Kinginger et al., 2018).

Learner perceptions are significant individual variables in SLA that "allow learners to speak for themselves" (Boye et al., 2021, p. 1). From a cognitive psychological perspective, learner perceptions—conceptualized as a subcomponent of metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1999)—constitute a critical individual difference variable that contributes to SLA (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova, 2014; Pintado Gutiérrez and Neville, 2024). Beyond shaping learners' experiences and reflective processes, these perceptions are deeply intertwined with shifts in learner behaviors, serving as key stimuli for action. This has spurred scholarly inquiry into the relationships between learner perceptions and core SLA constructs such as learner autonomy (Gu and Maley, 2008; Skyrme, 2007), learning strategies (Gao, 2006; Hajar, 2017, 2025), attitudes and motivation (Cotterall, 1999; Iftikhar et al., 2024; Iftikhar and Li, 2024). Research indicates that learners' preconceptions affect their attitudes, motivation, and behaviours as "a complex, multi-faceted construct" (Amuzie and Winke, 2009, p. 368).

In the SA context, research on learners' perceptions is particularly crucial. The immersive nature of SA requires students to more proactively reflect on their learning processes, renew self-efficacy, and develop learner autonomy—abilities whose effective exertion directly impacts learning outcomes (Skyrme, 2007). Brecht and Robinson (1995) also argued that a deep understanding of learners' perceptions in SA not only enriches theoretical knowledge in the field of SLA but also provides practical guidance for the optimization and successful implementation of SA programs.

Currently, relevant research on learners' perceptions of language learning in the SA context mainly focuses on three core areas: learners' individual perceptions in SA, perceptions of language learning during SA, dynamic changes in perceptions during SA.

A burgeoning body of research conceptualizes learner perception as a multifaceted construct encompassing diverse individual dimensions—including motivation (Du and Jackson, 2020), autonomy (Skyrme, 2007), self-efficacy (Cubillos and Ilvento, 2013), attitudes toward target languages/dialects (Artamonova, 2023; Schmidt, 2020), foreign language anxiety (Bensalem and Trevethan, 2023; Zhang and Tan, 2024), and expectations of SA outcomes (Harrell et al., 2017; Meara, 1994). These individual perceptions shape motivational dynamics (Wang, 2021), social participation patterns (Teng et al., 2023), and engagement with language practice, which are posited to influence language proficiency gains and sustained learning. Notably, most studies rely on descriptive approaches to hypothesize such links rather than systematic investigations, with few providing statistical evidence to validate how these perceptions translate into tangible linguistic achievements.

Building on this, existing research increasingly narrows in on language-specific perceptual content, covering perceived linguistic gains and evaluations of SA's linguistic benefits (cf. Prieto-Arranz et al., 2021; Houser and Bornais, 2023; Zalbidea et al., 2022). Highlighting learners' understanding of language learning and its potential influence during SA, these perceptions span both in-class and out-of-class contexts: learners form views on formal instruction's role (Brecht and Robinson, 1995), the value of out-of-class interactions for proficiency (Mendelson, 2004), and folk linguistic ideas that guide learning behaviors (Miller and Ginsberg, 1995). They also extend to psychobehavioral flexibility tied to L2 development (Zalbidea et al., 2022). Yet research scope remains limited, with insufficient focus on specific SA activities or influential individuals like local contacts.

A particularly distinctive focus within the research is the exploration of changing perceptions, as immersive environments uniquely reshape language learning cognitions. Only a handful of studies have examined this dynamic process: Amuzie and Winke (2009) used questionnaires to track 70 U.S. based ESL students, identifying three dimensions of evolving beliefs—teacher role, autonomy, and self-efficacy—and finding that autonomy and teacher-role perceptions shifted positively with SA length. In contrast, Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014) found Turkish EFL students' overall language learning perceptions stayed stable during a 5-month program, though a bidirectional link existed between pre/post-SA views and experience impact. Despite these insights, related research is scarce, with specific influencing factors (e.g., cultural distance) understudied. Though teacher roles are referenced, critical areas like SA classroom teaching (e.g., instructional strategies) and the impact of interaction partners (language buddies, international peers) are understudied.

Against this background of research on learners' perceptual experiences during SA, relatively little attention has been devoted to Chinese acquisition despite the significant increase in the number of CSL students participating in SA programs in China. Chinese has long received limited academic focus (Freed, 1998; Collentine and Freed, 2004), with research on CSL acquisition in SA remaining constrained in quantity and scope. Kinginger et al. (2018) further emphasized that such studies are "seriously under-represented" in

the broader SLA literature, adding that most existing work centers on holistic constructs—proficiency and fluency (p. 303).

Furthermore, existing research on SA in Chinese acquisition remains limited in scope, with a predominant focus on pedagogy, instruction, program design, and individual differences (Kinginger et al., 2018). Notably, there is a scarcity of studies examining how learners perceive their SA experiences and their language learning in China, with only a few exceptions—including the work of Yu and Watkins (2008), Zhang (2008), Tian and Lowe (2014), and Han and Maeng (2014).

Regarding individual factors in SA contexts, Yu and Watkins (2008) identified integrativeness and gender as the most salient predictors of L2 Chinese acquisition, while Zhang (2008) found that students demonstrated greater willingness to communicate (with lower anxiety) in classroom settings than out-of-class contexts, despite no significant differences in interaction frequency. Reflecting a shift from SA "products" to learning "processes" (Kinginger et al., 2018, p. 303), qualitative studies (Tian and Lowe, 2014; Teng et al., 2023) highlighted SA's value for fostering intercultural identity development, social participation, and concurrent gains in language proficiency and cultural understanding among international L2 Chinese learners. Focusing on instructional perceptions, Han and Maeng (2014) evaluated a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) program for Korean undergraduates in China: participants reported the program enhanced communicative confidence and reduced anxiety but preferred traditional teacher-centered instruction over real-world tasks. Two tasks—Visiting the Korean Embassy and Visiting the History Museum—were least favored due to logistical challenges (e.g., travel distance, distractions). Collectively, these findings underscore the role of individual differences, contextual dynamics, and instructional design in shaping SA learning experiences and outcomes in Chinese language acquisition.

In general, existing studies primarily focus on how individual variables affect language development. Less attention has been given to the effective activities, supportive roles of individuals and key elements in language learning perceived by learners during SA—leading to questions about the practical significance of study abroad. The target language and culture also exert a potential impact, as perceptions may vary across host countries. For instance, Amuzie and Winke (2009) found that learners studying abroad in the US tend to value teachers' role less. This may be attributed to the tradition of learner autonomy in the US and social expectations of teachers, whereas in Asian cultures such as China, the outcome may be different. In other words, the "dynamic and variable" learner beliefs (Amuzie and Winke, 2009, p. 366) are likely influenced not only by the learners themselves but also by the target language and culture. Moreover, most studies focus on overall evaluations, neglecting the impact of gender, language proficiency, and cultural background on learner perceptions in SA.

Against this background, as a means of complementing the insights available in the literature on learners' perception during study abroad and—more specifically, the beneficial factors in that context—the study offers an exploratory investigation into the effective activities, supportive roles of individuals, and key elements in SA as perceived by learners, as well as the impact of gender, proficiency level, and cultural background on such perceptions. The investigation is based on the following research questions:

1. How do learners perceive the beneficial factors for learning Chinese in China, covering effective activities, supportive roles of individuals, and key elements?
2. To what extent are learners' perceptions of these beneficial factors affected by gender, language proficiency, and cultural background?

Method

Participants

The study was conducted across two universities in southern China. The participants comprised 73 L2 Chinese learners from 22 countries aged between 18 and 30. All qualified participants had been residing in the country for at least 6 months by the time of this study with sufficient experience and a good understanding of learning in China.

Among the participants, there were 25 males and 48 females with a diverse cultural and linguistic background. Of the participants, 50 were from Asian countries, including Vietnam ($N = 18$), Thailand ($N = 8$), Indonesia ($N = 12$), Laos ($N = 4$), Malaysia ($N = 1$), Myanmar (Burma) ($N = 1$), Korea ($N = 1$), and Pakistan ($N = 3$), along with Mongolia ($N = 1$) and Nepal ($N = 1$). The remaining 23 participants hailed from European, American, or African countries, including Ireland ($N = 7$), Antigua and Barbuda ($N = 1$), Angola ($N = 3$), Belarus ($N = 1$), Russia ($N = 4$), Israel ($N = 1$), Haiti ($N = 1$), Georgia ($N = 1$), Italy ($N = 2$), Ukraine ($N = 1$), and the UK ($N = 1$). In this study, participants from Asia are referred to as having Asian cultural backgrounds, while those from Europe and other regions are considered to have non-Asian cultural backgrounds. In terms of language proficiency, 38 participants were classified as high-level learners at either HSK 4 ($n = 33$) or HSK 5 ($n = 5$), while 35 participants fell into the low-level category, with either HSK 3 ($n = 30$) or HSK 2 ($n = 5$) (See Table 1 for details).

Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire on SA experiences in China, following an introductory presentation and selective interviews. The questionnaire (see Appendix), adapting a 5-point Likert scale, was developed by adapting relevant items from established instruments in study abroad research (cf. Amuzie and Winke, 2009; Kaypak and Ortaçtepe, 2014), with modifications to align with the specific context of CSL. To address the research gaps concerning learners' contextual perceptions, additional items were constructed to assess their views on "effective activities" and "Chinese language buddies" (i.e., native Chinese peers who facilitate language practice). Prior to formal data collection, a pilot test of the initial

TABLE 1 Distribution of participants by proficiency level, gender, and cultural background.

Proficiency level	Gender	Non-Asian	Asian	Total
High	Female	2	25	38
-	Male	4	7	
Low	Female	11	10	35
-	Male	6	8	
Total	-	23	50	73

questionnaire was conducted with six recent graduates from Southeast Asian countries not involved in the present study. Revisions to the questionnaire—including adjustments to item wording, clarity, and relevance—were made based on a comprehensive analysis of the results and participant feedback. To minimise item dependence, the questionnaire was randomized. Participants received the questionnaires in English and Chinese, with language assistance provided where necessary. All participants provided their consent.

The questionnaire was designed to capture learners' perceptions of the activities, individuals, and factors facilitating second language acquisition during their study abroad experience. It comprises three sections: learner profiles, 22 closed-ended questions (using a 5-point Likert scale), and 3 open-ended questions. The profile section collects demographic and individual variables (e.g., gender, Chinese proficiency level, cultural background), while the closed-ended questions address general perceptions of learning in China, effective learning activities, supportive individuals, and key facilitating elements during study abroad. The open-ended questions complement these quantitative data by inviting participants to share specific insights into the activities, individuals, and factors that contributed to their Chinese language learning and to verify the consistency of their answers in various ways. Following the analysis of closed-ended and open-ended responses, selective follow-up interviews were conducted with participants who provided divergent answers, with a total of nine participants interviewed. The interviews focused on the participants' divergent answers, the potential reasons or feelings behind them, as well as their reflections on language learning during SA.

Data analysis

The data analysis concentrated on the quantitative data from the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. SPSS and jamovi software were employed for data analysis, with Cronbach's alpha used to assess reliability. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were conducted to evaluate validity, followed by factor analysis. To investigate the differences in perceptions regarding various items across the three factors, one-way ANOVAs were employed. Subsequently, one-way ANOVAs were also used to examine between-group differences in perceptions, specifically the significant impacts of gender, proficiency level, and cultural background on these perceptions.

Results and analysis

Factor analysis

Reliability tests were conducted to check the consistency, and satisfactory internal consistency reliability was achieved, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha at a level of 0.740. As the coefficient of internal consistency above 0.7 suggests high reliability (Hair et al., 1998), such results confirmed the high reliability of the data for further analysis. Validity tests were conducted, and the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) and Bartlett spherical tests were adopted. The KMO value was 0.790, and the Bartlett spherical test found a significant result of $p = 0.000$. According to the results of the KMO value and Bartlett's spherical test, the questionnaire is suitable for factor analysis. (For results of the reliability and validity tests, see Appendix).

For the exploratory factor analysis, the principal component method was employed. The scree plot and Eigenvalues were used to determine the number of extracted factors. Only factors with an Eigenvalue greater than 1 were retained, following the Kaiser Criterion, and items with commonalities below 0.4 were eliminated (Field, 2005). Consequently, three factors were identified, accounting for 54.93% of the total variance in the analysis (see Table 2).

The three factors were labelled as Factor 1, *the role of activities*; Factor 2, *the role of people*; and Factor 3, *the role of key elements*. Factor 1 consisted of five items related to activities in China, namely after-class learning with language buddies, daily life activities, students' club activities, watching Chinese programs, and learning in class, hereafter known as "learning with buddies," "daily activities," "club activities," "watching programs" and "learning in class," respectively. The Language Buddy program is an initiative in Chinese universities that pairs CSL students with local students of a similar age, often majoring in International Chinese Education. The pairing offers learning tutoring and guidance on life activities to help international students adapt to study and life in China. The volunteer language buddies also benefit from the experience by enhancing their teaching skills and intercultural competence. Factor 2 encompassed three items that related to the perception of important individuals who support language development in China: "teachers," "language buddies," and "classmates." Factor 3 addressed three key elements that promote language development in China: "class instruction," "social interaction," and "communication." Overall, the results demonstrate the significant factors influencing language development within the Chinese context in learners' perception.

For an overview of the descriptive statistics (see Appendix), the overall scores for each factor were as follows: Factor 1 had a score of 2.63, Factor 2 had a score of 3.55, and Factor 3 scored 3.56. In general, learners' perceptions of supportive individuals and key elements during SA were more positive than their perceptions of effective activities, with all scores falling at a medium level. Among the five items in Factor 1, "learning with buddies" was rated the highest at 3.11, followed by "daily activities" at 3.04, "learning in class" at 2.90, "club activities" at 2.14, and "watching programs" at 1.97. For Factor 2, "teachers" and "language buddies" received the highest scores of 3.86 and 3.79, respectively, while "classmates" scored the lowest at 3.00. In Factor 3, "communication" and "class instruction" were rated highest at 3.90 and 3.82, respectively, with "social interaction" at 2.96.

To determine whether there were significant differences between items within each factor, one-way ANOVAs were conducted for further analysis.

The different values of different items in each of the three factors

As the data did not meet the normality assumption or the homogeneity of variance (see Appendix), nonparametric tests (Kruskal–Wallis) were utilised in jamovi to explore differences within each factor.

Results presented in Table 3 indicated significant differences between items in each of the three factors: Factor 1 ($p < 0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.105$), Factor 2 ($p < 0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.0716$), and Factor 3 ($p < 0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.0976$). These results showed notable differences in learners' perceptions among the items within each factor. Further comparisons using the

TABLE 2 Factor analysis of learners' perception.

Factors	Questionnaire items	F1	F2	F3
The role of activities	After-class learning with language buddies is important in developing Chinese.	0.636		
	Daily life activities are important in improving my Chinese.	0.724		
	I think that student club activities are important in improving my Chinese.	0.808		
	Watching Chinese programs is the key to improving my Chinese.	0.499		
	Learning in class is an important activity to improve Chinese.	0.770		
The role of people	Chinese teachers are the key to language development in study in China.		0.517	
	Chinese buddies are the key to language development in study in China.		0.722	
	Classmates are important for language development in study in China.		0.469	
The role of key elements	The key to improving my Chinese in China is classroom instruction.			−0.592
	The key factor in learning in China lies in social interaction with the locals.			0.413
	The key factor in learning in China lies in the large amount of communication with the local people.			0.649
Eigenvalue		3.35	1.58	1.10
Percentage of variance %		30.49	14.39	10.05
Cumulative percentage %		30.49	44.88	54.93

TABLE 3 Results of Kruskal–Wallis tests in the variable in each of the three factors.

Factors	χ^2	df	p	ε^2
Factor 1	38.3	4	< 0.001	0.105
Factor 2	15.6	2	< 0.001	0.0716
Factor 3	21.3	2	< 0.001	0.0976

TABLE 4 Results of Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner comparisons in variable in each of three factors.

Factors	Comparisons	Mean 1	Mean 2	W	*P*
Factor 1	1–2	3.11	2.14	−5.886	**< 0.001**
	1–4	3.11	1.97	−6.607	**< 0.001**
	2–3	2.14	3.04	5.196	**0.002**
	3–4	3.04	1.97	−6.392	**< 0.001**
	4–5	1.97	2.90	5.419	**0.001**
Factor 2	1–3	3.86	3.00	−5.046	**0.001**
	2–3	3.79	3.00	−4.491	**0.004**
Factor 3	1–3	3.90	2.96	−5.655	**< 0.001**
	2–3	3.82	2.96	−5.481	**< 0.001**

The Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner test was conducted as a nonparametric post-hoc analysis to compare pairwise differences across groups after a significant main effect was detected in the Kruskal-Wallis test. Boldface *P*-values indicate statistically significant differences (α = 0.05). Only significant results are presented; nonsignificant pairwise comparisons are available in Appendix.

Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner method (see Table 4) showed that in Factor 1, "learning with language buddies" was highly regarded, with significantly better recognition compared to "club activities" ($p < 0.001$, $w = -5.886$) and "watching programs" ($p < 0.001$, $w = -6.607$). "Daily activities" were recognised more highly than "club activities" ($p = 0.002$, $w = 5.196$) and "watching programs" ($p < 0.001$, $w = -6.932$). "Learning in class" was also significantly better recognized than "watching Chinese programs" ($p = 0.001$, $w = 5.419$). In Factor 2, no significant differences were found between "Chinese teachers" and "language buddies," but differences were noted between these two groups and "classmates," with $p = 0.001$ ($w = -5.046$) and $p = 0.004$ ($w = -4.491$), respectively. Similarly, in Factor 3, no significant differences were found between "communication" and "class instruction," but significant differences were present between these two and "social interaction" ($p < 0.001$, $w = -5.655$ and $p < 0.001$, $w = -5.481$), respectively.

Overall, the results indicate that "learning with language buddies," "daily activities," and "learning in class" are highly valued, whereas "watching Chinese programs" and "club activities" are viewed less favourably. Additionally, the contributions of "Chinese teachers" and "language buddies" were deemed more valuable than those of "classmates." Lastly, "communication" and "class instruction" received more positive agreement than "social interaction."

Difference analysis

The next is on the impact of between-group differences in gender, proficiency level, and cultural background using one-way ANOVAs. As not all the data meet the assumptions of normality or homogeneity of variance (see Appendix), nonparametric tests (Kruskal–Wallis) in jamovi were employed to investigate the differences between the variables.

Gender impact on learners' perception

Results in Table 5 indicate significant differences in 4 out of 5 items concerning Factor 1 activities, including "club activities" ($p = 0.025$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.07015$), "daily activities" ($p = 0.051$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.05312$), "watching programs" ($p = 0.017$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.07849$), and "learning in class" ($p = 0.011$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.09087$). No significant differences were found in Factor 2 and Factor 3 items. Further comparisons in Table 6 indicated that female learners had significantly higher recognition than males in "club activities" ($p = 0.025$, $w = 3.18$), "daily activities" ($p = 0.051$, $w = 2.77$), "watching programs" ($p = 0.017$, $w = 3.36$), and "learning in class" ($p = 0.011$, $w = 0.09087$). These results suggest that female learners tend

to place greater importance on clubs, daily learning activities, and watching programs, pointing to the impact of gender on perception in SA.

Proficiency level on learners' perception

Table 5 reveals a significant impact of proficiency level on 2 out of 5 items in Factor 1 activities, including "daily activities" ($p = 0.023$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.07221$) and "watching programs" ($p = 0.041$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.05785$). Additionally, significant differences were found in Factor 3 concerning "class instruction" ($p = 0.014$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.08325$). Further analysis in Table 6 demonstrated that high-level learners had significantly better recognition than low-level learners in "daily activities" ($p = 0.023$, w = 3.22), "watching programs" ($p = 0.041$, w = 2.89) and "class instruction" ($p = 0.014$, w = 3.46). While no statistically significant effects were observed, two variables—"learning with language buddies" ($p = 0.057$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.05047$) and "club activities" ($p = 0.059$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.04955$)—approached statistical significance, with trends favoring high-level learners. Together with the values of these two items, this finding points to the potential advantages of high-level learners. These findings indicate that high-level learners in SA are more likely to value activities such as learning with buddies, participating in club activities, engaging in daily tasks, and watching programs, highlighting the impact of proficiency level on leveraging diverse learning opportunities in SA.

Cultural background impact on learners' perception

As in Table 5, the significant impact of cultural background was found only in "learning with language buddies" ($p = 0.004$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.11546$). Further comparisons (see Table 6). indicated that learners from Asian cultural backgrounds had significantly higher recognition of language buddies compared to non-Asian learners ($p = 0.004$, w = −4.08). These results suggest that learners from Asian cultural backgrounds have a greater appreciation for learning with language buddies, underscoring the potential implications of cultural differences in learners' perception of SA.

TABLE 5 Results of Kruskal–Wallis tests in gender, level, and cultural background impact.

Impact	Factors	Items	χ^2	df	p	ε^2
Gender	Factor 1	2	5.0509	1	**0.025**	0.07015
		3	3.8244	1	**0.051**	0.05312
		4	5.6511	1	**0.017**	0.07849
		5	6.5423	1	**0.011**	0.09087
Level	Factor 1	1	3.6342	1	**0.057**	0.05047
		2	3.5677	1	**0.059**	0.04955
		3	5.1988	1	**0.023**	0.07221
		4	4.1649	1	**0.041**	0.05785
	Factor 3	2	5.9940	1	**0.014**	0.08325
Cultural ground	Factor 1	1	8.3131	1	**0.004**	0.11546

Boldface *P*-values indicate statistically significant differences (α = 0.05). Only significant results are presented; nonsignificant pairwise comparisons are available in Appendix.

Discussion

This study investigated L2 Chinese learners' perceptions of beneficial factors during SA in China, as well as the impact of gender, proficiency level, and cultural background on these perceptions.

The first research question examined learners' perceptions of beneficial factors. Factor analysis identified three key factors: the role of effective activities, the role of supportive people, and the role of key elements. Notably, learners rated their recognition of key elements the highest (3.56/5), followed closely by the supportive people (3.55/5). In contrast, recognition of effective activities received the lowest score (2.63/5). The overall average score of 3.13/5 points was at a medium level.

Such results suggest that learners' perceptions have not yet reached their expected level. The data in the role of supportive people (3.55/5) and key elements (3.56/5) points to a good understanding of and adaptation to life and study during SA. In contrast, the score for effective activities (2.63/5) reflects an unsatisfied attitude, indicating that the arrangement does not meet expectations. SA learners

TABLE 6 Results of Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner comparisons in gender, level and cultural background impact.

Impact	Items	Mean 1	Mean 2	W	P
Gender (Mean 1 $n = 25$, Mean 2 $n = 48$)	Club activities	1.68	2.38	3.18	**0.025**
	Daily activities	2.56	3.29	2.77	**0.051**
	Watch programs	1.52	2.21	3.36	**0.017**
	Learning in class	2.20	3.27	0.09087	**0.011**
Proficiency level (Mean 1 $n = 34$, Mean 2 $n = 39$)	Learning with buddies	2.74	3.44	2.70	**0.057**
	Club activities	1.88	2.36	2.67	**0.059**
	Daily activities	2.62	3.41	3.22	**0.023**
	Watch programs	1.71	2.21	2.89	**0.041**
	Class instruction	3.38	4.21	3.46	**0.014**
Cultural background (Mean 1 $n = 49$, Mean 2 = 24)	Learning with buddies	3.45	2.42	−4.08	**0.004**

The Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner test was conducted as a nonparametric post-hoc analysis to compare pairwise differences across groups after a significant main effect was detected in the Kruskal-Wallis test. Boldface *P*-values indicate statistically significant differences (α = 0.05). Only significant results are presented; nonsignificant pairwise comparisons are available in Appendix.

generally have high expectations of SA and its effects on language learning and intercultural experiences (cf. Harrell et al., 2017; Houser and Bornais, 2023). Their expectations are varied and sometime impractical, but with clear targets in stimulating acquisition and intercultural competence. The interviews data also expressed such attitudes: a positive reception of individuals and key elements in SA, but disappointment with the activity arrangements.

Additionally, significant differences were observed among items in each factor. Learners generally valued those with whom they had continuous contact with and who had the potential to offer abundant, authentic communication for language development rather than casual encounters in life. For example, "Learning in class" and "learning with language buddies" received high recognition compared to "club activities" and "watching programs." While "watching programs" is important in L2 learning—particularly in the foreign language context—its role in study abroad seems limited, aligning with the emphasis on authentic communication in SA. Teachers and language buddies were highlighted over classmates, schoolmates, and people who met in life. While these results are not in line with Martinsen et al. (2010), who noted the positive role of non-native speakers in SA (and the minimal gains from interaction dominated by native speakers), they might suggest the potential impact of cultural contexts in Spain and China and the beneficial effect of language buddies for instructed learning out of class in this study rather than random native speakers. Similarly, "class instruction" and "communication" found more acceptance than "social interaction," while the latter is considered an attractive SA feature. Together with culture visits included in many SA programs, such elements do not seem to effectively facilitate L2 learning in learners' perception.

The interviews echoed similar understandings, such as the role of a Chinese husband for a Ukrainian participant, members and activities in a yacht club for an Irish boy, basketball teammates for an Indonesian boy, and a weekly volunteer activity in communication with pupils in a nearby primary school. Also, the frequent daily contact—though often cited as a key attraction in SA—does not meet learners' expectations. All these points to the focus of learners' perceptions on factors facilitating continuous language learning.

Such results point to a target-oriented perception among learners. Learners generally valued learning scenarios with long-term support for language learning over those exciting but one-time encounters in life, such as their first shopping experience or a visit to the folk museum. Thus, this highlights the significance of systematic formal instruction in SA from the learners' perspective (Brecht and Robinson, 1995), echoing Zhang's (2008) findings on learners' instructional preferences and aligning with Huebner (1998), who contended that "informal exposure without instruction may not be sufficient for successful second language learning" (p. 3). Segalowitz and Freed (2004) further pointed out that out-of-class language contact during SA may "simply be too little" and "too few for potential gains" (p. 192).

A particularly nuanced finding emerges from the divergent scores of "Learning in class" (Factor 1, $M = 2.90$) and "Class instruction" (Factor 3, $M = 3.82$), reflecting the complex reality of formal education within the context of SA experiences (Chen and Howard, 2024). The high score for "Class instruction" may stem from learners' educational socialization: formal education in China serves as a trusted "cognitive anchor" providing grammatical, lexical, and cultural frameworks. It may also indicate that SA learning is not as optimal for language development as commonly perceived (Segalowitz and Freed, 2004; Schmidt, 2020) and that learners encountering challenges in real-life interactions may retreat to formal instruction, recognizing its practical value. In contrast, the relatively low score for "Learning in class"—and its inferiority to "Learning with buddies" ($M = 3.11$) and "Daily activities" ($M = 3.04$)—highlights a gap between the intent of formal instruction and its implementation in SA classrooms. Several factors may account for this gap. First, SA in-class activities may fail to connect with the authentic language demands learners face outside the classroom. Second, the pedagogical style of Chinese teachers may not align with learners' expectations. While learners value instruction, they may find in-class activities overly passive — especially when compared to the dynamic, reciprocal communication in "language buddy" interactions or the meaningful interaction from successful daily language use.

This nuance carries profound pedagogical implications for SA programs. First, it highlights the need to bridge the gap between instructional intent and activity design (Bird and Rubenstein, 2025): formal instruction should retain its role as a source of systematic support but must be operationalized through in-class activities that are authentic, interactive, and linked to out-of-class experiences (Chen and Howard, 2024). For example, teachers could design lessons that prepare learners for specific daily tasks (e.g., writing WeChat messages, joining a social discussion) and then use in-class time for practice and to reflect on prior out-of-class language encounters. Second, SA programs should integrate formal instruction with informal learning opportunities explicitly. Teachers could, for instance, assign "language buddy" tasks that align with in-class content (e.g., practicing newly learned vocabulary, introducing local cultures or activities), thereby employing formal instruction as a facilitator of informal learning. In short, this score divergence challenges educators to reconsider the role of formal instruction in SA as a bridge between classrooms and real-world language use.

Furthermore, it raises questions about the role of cultural visits, cultural events and social activities, questioning the credibility of such activities in promoting language development during SA, aligning with the SA learners in Han and Maeng (2014) on the low scores of culture programs and the preference for the traditional teacher-centred classes. While these activities are generally highlighted in SA programs, students' complaints about distance, disturbance, and unexpected situations in Han and Maeng (2014) suggest careful arrangement with clear targets for acquisition. Learners' lower perceived value of cultural and social activities compared to classroom or buddy-based learning aligns with the target-oriented mindset previously noted. After initial excitement from cultural experiences, learners may refocus on their core study-abroad objectives in Chinese learning. This observation reveals a potential prioritization of practical language acquisition over cultural allure among CSL learners, driven by the group's demographic diversity. Such insights underscore the need to carefully design study-abroad itineraries (Bird and Rubenstein, 2025) to reconcile cultural exposure with targeted linguistic development. In this respect, Cadd (2012) offered the incorporation of cultural exchanges and oral learning in 12 real-life tasks, "force(ing)" American undergraduate students in SA to "take the initiative and approach native speakers" (p. 240), such as identifying a local dish and local cultural facets with local people. In a word, the cultural and social interactions in SA should be well-designed to go beyond culture experiencing to language learning for an effective attraction in SA.

SA is based on "instructed exposure in the foreign language classroom followed by naturalistic exposure in the target language community" (Howard, 2019, p. 4). Ingram (2005, p. 216) notes that if intensive SA programs are to "play a serious role in recasting the language requirement," they must "help students integrate overseas experiences with language instruction on campus." Salaberry et al. (2019) thus call for attention to classroom interaction and practice to reflect the real-life environment outside the classroom and to provide functional language for students' interactions outside the classroom during SA. This study highlights the importance of classroom instruction and instructed out-of-class activities in SA, calling for attention in further studies.

The second research question examined how learners' perceptions were influenced by gender, language proficiency, and cultural background. Gender differences were observed in Factor 1 across "club activities," "watching programs," and "classroom learning," while a trend toward significance was noted for "daily activities"—with females exhibiting a stronger preference in all cases. At the proficiency level, higher-level learners demonstrated greater recognition of Factor 1 across "learning with language buddies," "club activities," "daily activities," and "watching programs"—with "learning with language buddies" and "club activities" approaching statistical significance—and of Factor 3 in "class instruction." The impact of the background was particularly evident in Factor 1 in "learning with language buddies," with a preference shown by Asian learners.

Specifically, the comparisons suggest the impact of gender on SA experience (cf. Yu and Watkins, 2008) in activities, which could be linked to the gender characteristics and safety considerations specific to female learners in China. Due to inherent gender traits, female learners prioritised learning in smaller social circles and more stable environment, such as club activities, daily engagements, classroom learning, and watching programs. The preference of high-level learners, confirming Lawani et al. (2012) on the impact of proficiency on the SA experience, suggests that high-level learners are more open to learning in SA and that greater proficiency facilitates broader engagement with learning opportunities. The appreciation for classroom instruction among high-level learners indicates that increased proficiency heightens awareness of limitations, further driving engagement in learning. In other words, high-level learners may be more capable of applying class learning to real-life context, thereby recognizing the practical meaning of language learning and, in turn, re-engaging with classroom instruction.

Besides, the background impact, echoing Lawani et al. (2012) on the potential influence of cultural background on SA learners' perception, suggested that students from Aisan cultural backgrounds valued their experiences with language buddies more highly, underscoring cultural differences in SA. For learners from Asian cultures, close contact and volunteer activities are generally comfortable, albeit sometimes awkward; nonetheless, they contribute positively to language learning while fostering an awareness of cultural differences. In contrast, non-Asian learners may find such close interactions outside the curriculum to be intrusive, threatening a sense of privacy, personal life, and independence. Consequently, Asian learners have a more favourable view of learning with language buddies, whereas non-Asian learners may approach these activities cautiously. Therefore, while the language buddy is highly esteemed by authorities in Chinese universities, reflecting the attitude and the principle of the society on its welcoming and helping attitude to support the students "far away from home," it should be mindful of the potential cultural conflicts.

On the other hand, there is a consensus on the role of the individuals (i.e., teachers and language buddies) and the role of key elements (i.e., classroom instruction and communication with locals), indicating general consistency in perceptions regardless of gender, level and cultural background. Such consensus is not aligned with that of Amuzie and Winke (2009), which found that students in a U.S. SA program placed less value on teacher' role classroom instruction compared to their home contexts. Students in that study showed "decreased beliefs in the dependence on the teacher's role in learning" when they "came to less strongly believe in the importance of the teacher's role in learning" with more strong beliefs in the importance of learner autonomy (p. 374). Amuzie and Winke (2009, p. 375) attributed that to the impact of the U.S. culture: most learners were from countries with "teacher-fronted classes" where "teachers are often viewed as authority figures rather than facilitators of learning," while the new classrooms in U.S. "allowed them more opportunities to express their ideas, ask questions, and interact with peers." In contrast, the current study pointed to another perspective, as SA in China might be shaped by the Chinese language and culture.

This discrepancy highlights the significant impact of the target language and culture on perception. The role of teachers in two different cultures with different expectations contributes to this, together with different instructional practices between countries, evidencing the potential impact of the target culture on L2 learners, who prioritize teachers who "be more in line with traditional Asian values" (Lambert and Zhang, 2019, p. 409). As Lambert and Zhang (2019) demonstrated on their study on the influence of different target languages (Chinese and English) showed, L2 Chinese learners felt "more comfortable" in a teacher-generated condition due to "the influence of Chinese culture and attitudes on the Chinese learners, particularly the importance of power status and the principle of modesty," while L2 English learners felt more comfortable in the learner-generated condition (p. 409). In Chinese culture, teachers are held to high expectations to teach, guide and care for students. Therefore, while the teacher-centred methods are less appealing, the SA context might mitigate this, evidenced by the contrast in values between the role of the teacher (3.86/5) and classroom instruction (2.90/5). Such impacts also extend to other aspects, such as communication and support from language buddies and locals. For example, while interviews mentioned "awkward" or "embarrassing" moments (attributed to Chinese people being "too nice" and "too close"), learners expressed fondness for these individuals as "kind" and "helpful," reflected in their high acceptance of individuals in SA in China.

The results highlight the impact of learners' attributes, as well as the target language and culture. Differences were observed in gender, proficiency level, and cultural background, suggesting the impact of female traits, characteristics of high-proficiency learners, and values associated with different cultural backgrounds. These significant variations suggest that different groups prioritise different aspects of their SA experiences, calling for attention to appropriate adjustments tailored to different learners. Additionally, the study highlights the important role of the target language and culture in shaping learners' perception, suggesting that the L2 might influence learners' perception and identifying directions for future research.

1.1 Limitations and future directions

The results also point to the limitations of the study. First, the number of participants is limited, particularly among subgroups, as most participants are from Asian countries. This may suggest that the study's findings could be influenced by this demographic. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution when considering participants from other regions. Second, the effect of SA length can vary among participants. The participants' length varied from 6 months, potentially impacting learners' perception of the process (cf. Amuzie and Winke, 2009; Houser and Bornais, 2023), though this study targeted different aspects of learners' perception. We believed those with longer SA would have a much clearer perception of language learning in SA and more consistent with stable beliefs (cf. Kaypak and Ortaçtepe, 2014); however, the results should be carefully read. The third limitation is its heavy reliance on quantitative questionnaire data to measure participants' perceptions. While follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify ambiguous responses, the design cannot—and does not claim to—yield the rich, contextually grounded qualitative insights afforded by interview- or diary-centered methodologies. Quantitative data effectively captures statistical trends (e.g., score differentials) but fails to unpack the subjective motivations, situational barriers, or nuanced decision-making processes in participants' experiences. This gap underscores the critical need for future mixed-methods research to complement the present findings and enable a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Practical implications

This study offers guidance for optimizing Chinese SA program design and language instruction. First, formal instruction should balance systematic support with authentic, interactive in-class activities linked to real-life language demands—e.g., preparing learners for daily tasks like WeChat communication and reflecting on out-of-class encounters such as bargaining. Second, integrate formal teaching with informal learning by aligning language buddy tasks with curriculum content (e.g., practicing new vocabulary or introducing cultural elements). Third, redesign cultural and social activities to prioritize language acquisition, such as task-based cultural exchanges that encourage active interaction with locals, and cultural tours where learners interview locals about Spring Festival couplets or traditional dishes instead of passive visits. Finally, tailor support to different learners: provide stable settings for female learners, expand debate opportunities for high-proficiency students, and offer flexible (e.g., optional, frequency-adjustable) buddy programs to respect non-Asian learners' privacy needs. These adjustments can bridge the gap between learner expectations and program outcomes, enhancing SA's effectiveness for L2 Chinese development.

Conclusion

The current study analysed quantitative data regarding L2 Chinese learners' perceptions of beneficial variables in language learning during SA in China. It also examined differences among these variables and the potential impact of gender, proficiency level, and cultural background on learners' perception.

The findings revealed that learners valued the role of effective activities, supportive individuals and key elements associated with lasting and continuous effects in promoting L2 learning, from in-class learning to learning with language buddies, from teacher to buddies, and from classroom instruction to communication with locals. Thus, the study highlights the importance of classroom instruction in SA (Brecht and Robinson, 1995) while raising questions about the effective design of cultural events to promote language learning in addition to cultural awareness. Based on these, this study contributes to the understanding of the role of activity arrangement in SA by emphasizing instructed out-of-class activities in SA (Cadd, 2012) rather than unguided individual exploration in the SA jungle, calling for more attention to the exploration of the effective activities in SA.

In addition, the findings indicated that learners with different cultural backgrounds, genders, and language proficiency levels prioritised their targets in SA, as reflected in their perceptions. This highlights the impact of individual attributes on learners' perceptions and calls for targeted adjustments for different learners in SA programs. The findings also underscore the influence of the target language and culture on L2 learners' perceptions, raising the question of when learners develop perceptions aligned with the target language and culture. Furthermore, future studies should investigate whether or not such perceptions in this study will change after learners return home, under the influence of their native language and culture (Amuzie and Winke, 2009, p. 376). Such research should explore whether these perceptions are internalised due to SA or the learning of the target language, thereby extending the understanding on the impact of the target culture on L2 learners established by Lambert and Zhang (2019).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Academic Committee, School of International Languages, Xiamen University of Technology. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

JC: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RG: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1665037/full#supplementary-material

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