

Vietnamese Students' Perspectives on Informal Interaction Opportunities in English in the UK: Expectation and Contextual Realities

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Abstract: Several studies in recent years have indicated the benefits of study abroad and its challenges for international students which have a close link with interaction opportunities in English. One of the problems was the disappointment at the lack of opportunities to communicate with local and international friends. The aim of this investigation was to analyse existing gaps between Vietnamese overseas students (VOS)' expectation and their post-arrival real experience about interaction opportunities in English, to find factors influencing their informal interaction, and what could be done to help them gain more interaction opportunities. This research employed both a quantitative questionnaire-based approach and a qualitative interview-based approach. Participants were 38 VOS studying in the UK. Findings reveal that there is a significant discrepancy between VOS' expectations and their real experience in terms of interactions in English. Both cultural differences and language barriers prevent students from taking up interaction opportunities successfully, which leads to their low sense of belonging to local communities. Participants also had limited contact with British people while they built close friendships with other internationals. The length of study in the UK has significant impacts on students' satisfaction levels.

Index Terms: Keywords: Interaction Opportunities, Social Interactions, International Students, Study Abroad, Vietnamese Student, Study-Abroad Expectations.

I. INTRODUCTION

The number of Vietnamese students choosing to study English abroad, especially in English-speaking countries, has increasing significantly over the last fifteen years (Nguyen, 2012). According to the Institute of International Education - IIE (2017), Vietnam ranked sixth in the top countries with the greatest number of students in the USA. Similarly, Vietnam was in the top six source countries in 2018 for the number of students who are studying in Australia (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018). When Vietnamese students were asked about the main reasons of wishing to study abroad, especially in the USA and the United Kingdom (UK), two-thirds of participants (65%) answered to 'improve language skills' (IIE, 2010). Those above numbers may reflect the Vietnamese students' considerable needs and interests in learning English and pursuing academic courses abroad. Among English-speaking countries, the UK is acknowledged as the second largest destination for international students (Newsome and Cooper, 2016).

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Undoubtedly, international students have contributed significantly to the UK's economy and status in the world (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009).

Additionally, studying abroad is widely expected to assist students in enhancing their language competence and integration into target language communities. Students believe that it is extremely attractive to obtain professional experiences in an English-speaking country (Yates & Wahid, 2013), and to take advantages of unlimited access to language learning opportunities which yields significant competence improvement (Kinging, 2008). However, the linguistic benefits that overseas students may receive from short-term and long-term courses are still in a need of investigation. In a study where students were asked about their belief changes after studying abroad, Asian students were reported to be frustrated and dissatisfied with a lack of opportunities to communicate with local and international friends (Amuzie & Winke, 2009). This raises a controversial question whether Vietnamese overseas students (VOS) in the UK are facing similar problems with their interaction opportunities. It is also hoped to find why this might take place and where the solutions might lie.

A. The Significance of the Study

Recent studies have investigated into the relationship between overseas students' language development and factors influencing their input exposure and social engagement in the UK, namely interactional frequency (Wright and Schartner, 2013), social network (Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Montgomery, 2010), linguistic perceptions (Tragant, 2012) and intercultural experience (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009). Students from Spain, China, USA, Indonesia and other nations were investigated in those research whereas Vietnamese students who ranked UK as the desirable destination to study (IIE, 2010) have not emerged in any particular study.

Indeed, the relationship between VOS' expectations and their real experiences about interaction opportunities has not been paid sufficient attention. There is a little concern about the VOS' experience and their attitude toward English practice in terms of their interaction opportunities in the community. It is also worth mentioning that mixed method studies are rarely found in this research field about international students' experience (Wright and Schartner, 2013). Therefore,



by examining VOS' experience in interaction opportunities, this triangulated study is hoped to find any possible gaps between the expectations of target-language practice among their community before studying abroad, and their real experience in interaction opportunities in English speaking countries, particularly in the UK.

Examining the students' perspectives on interaction opportunities is potentially essential for two reasons. Primarily, more Vietnamese learners are studying abroad with an intention to improve their language skills and to acquire more interaction opportunities (IEE, 2010; Allen and Dupuy, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to investigate into whether VOS enjoy interaction opportunities within their community as one of their possible expectations and whether they think those opportunities can make a difference to their communicative competence compared to studying in their home country. Another reason is that understanding students' perspectives and experience may be useful for programme administrators, curriculum designers and, teachers responsible for courses to have a deeper insight into interaction opportunities in English in the UK. Participants' experience can also help prospective students to prepare better for their important journey ahead.

It should be emphasised that this study focuses on informal face-to-face interaction opportunities merely. Formal interaction opportunities or interactions in academic contexts such as within lectures or in seminars will not be covered in this study. Similarly, online interactions which may play an important role in overseas students' life will not be taken into account due to the limited scope of the study. Finally, psychological elements and in-depth students' personal growth are not considered focal points of the present study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Study Abroad

The trend of learning second language (L2) in target language-speaking countries has become popular among L2 learners all over the world. It is frequently assumed that the best way to gain proficiency of a foreign language is to study abroad which provides ultimate opportunities for language learning (Allen, 2010; Alcon-Soler, 2015). Likewise, study abroad context makes students become socialised and active to use English when they take part in various speech events and communicative repertoires (Kinginger and Farrell, 2004). Jackson (2008) employed ethnographic investigation into three factors - language, cultural learning and identity rebuilding when study abroad. The main finding is that students' sense of identity, their belief in L2 learning, cultural knowledge and the general world were influenced dramatically by a study-abroad context. However, how students evaluate the effectiveness of the linguistic events to their language competence development is not sufficiently investigated.

Recently, there are an increasing number of studies conducted in English-speaking countries about international students' experience with social immersions. In the UK, Montgomery and Mcdowell (2009) found that the international students are becoming more positive and active in taking advantage of international communities, instead of

local communities. By contrast, in another study, Wright and Schartner (2013) argue that international students still show a reluctant attitude to take up cultural interactions. Therefore, there is a need in helping international students overcome social barriers to adapt with British cultures and gain successful interactions. Similarly, in Australia, international students received insufficient support for their social integration and interaction, which leads to the idea of providing language support in both social speaking skills and academic skills in preparation courses (Yates and Wahid, 2013). Lastly, in the USA, Amuzie and Winke (2009) describe that their international students were disappointed because their communication with Americans "did not come as naturally as they had expected" (p.375). As for VOS around the world, a few recent studies have paid attention to students' positive changes in their academic perceptions after a short twinning programme in New Zealand (Vu and Doyle, 2014) and VOS' social engagement in an international education context in Australia (Pham, 2013). Despite a considerable body of empirical research about international students' experience in English-speaking countries, no particular research has been done with overseas Vietnamese students' perspectives about this problem in the UK.

1) Students' Expectations

Researchers might expect different reasons from students for their decision to study abroad. Understanding students' expectations is immensely important because there is a relationship between the pre-departure expectations and students' psychological health and anxiety levels. Yan and Berliner (2011) explain that greater discrepancies between expectations and lived experiences can lead to higher degrees of depression. Regarding expectations, international students decide to come to the UK because they desire to gain knowledge about British culture (Montgomery and Mcdowell; 2009). Similarly, Chinese students revealed that American cultures are attractive, which encourages them to choose USA as their destination (Austin and Shen, 2016). Those results may indicate a great concern of foreign students toward local culture, and their abroad journey is partially aimed at cultural exploration. In another qualitative study, Newsome and Cooper (2016) indicate that many participants possess impractical expectations when they came to the UK. Their Chinese participant even "expected Britain to be heaven" (p.202), which was associated with their depressed mood later. Concerning VOS's expectations or motivations before having arrived Australia, Pham (2013) demonstrates many financial-related factors such as employment opportunities and immigration prospects, rather than aiming at culture exploration, university support or interaction opportunities. It seems that language proficiency and local culture which play vital roles in deciding students' social and academic experience abroad, are hardly mentioned in those VOS-related investigations.

To be more specific, no case study has focused solely upon understanding VOS' expectations before they arrived in the UK, especially on their language proficiency, intercultural competence and interactions. Educators and

researchers might ask whether Vietnamese students would expect different factors in different degrees; and how the reality is. Likewise, the UK education institutions might question how successful their strategies and efforts are in meeting Vietnamese students' cultural and social expectations. This study can help examine this question by presenting comparative data about the expectation and reality, which again has not been considered before.

2) Study Abroad and Progress in Competence

Since the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has been reconceptualised with more focus on the social and contextual perspectives, a range of empirical research has investigated into how learners are influenced by studying in abroad environments. The study abroad context results in the changes in language learning beliefs (Amuzie and Winke, 2009), the development of meta-pragmatic awareness and pragmatic knowledge (Kingtoner and Farrell, 2004; Alcon-Soler, 2015), intercultural adaptability (Wright & Schartner, 2013), interlanguage competence and language skills (Barron, 2006; Lafford, 2004). Regarding oral fluency, study abroad context allows students make significant improvement, particularly in producing easy and smooth speech at a nativelike speed, compared with their counterparts at their home country (Collentine and Freed, 2004). Additionally, students' acquisition of idiomatic phrasal verbs has improved significantly after a short-term course (Conroy, 2016). As for university students in Korea, Kang (2014) also found positive impacts of students' study abroad experiences on their willingness to communicate in English and their speaking skills. Especially, their participants were dynamic in catching opportunities to express themselves in English with their teachers. Therefore, one common finding observed in previous studies is that overseas students gradually develop their communication skills only if they give up passive attitudes towards interactions with other English speakers.

In general, qualitative studies tend to examine international students' satisfaction and personal development in relation to cultural adjustments, learning belief and social relationship while quantitative research focuses on their achievement in language skills after study abroad. For example, several students with positive adjustment in Newsome and Cooper's research (2016) strongly believed that they had enriched their personal experience after finishing the postgraduate course in the UK. They built harmonious relationships with other partners and even found love within their campus, which gave them a sense of belonging and engagement. In terms of personal growth, a Chinese student reported an interesting point that she started changing her view on her own culture and developed her tolerance for other people (Newsome and Cooper, 2016). Another consensus finding from Munir study (2006) is that Indonesian students who spent more than a year in Australia perceived their English language proficiency as greater than those staying for less than one year. They also supposed that they gained an improvement in their confidence and appropriateness in English oral skills after spending time in Australia. One shared finding can be recognised from those studies is that the progress made depends largely on students'

adaptability and awareness.

On the other hand, there are several debates as to what international students achieve after studying abroad. First of all, it is essential to examine whether studying abroad is always beneficial to students or specifically, the most effective way to improve English language competence. In interesting interviews into 14 international students' language learning beliefs after studying in the United States, participants show their dissatisfaction with their level of language learning improvement during their stay and agree that studying abroad is not the most effective way to improve English: "simply studying abroad does not promise success in L2 learning unless they make an effort to communicate in the L2" (Amuzie and Winke, 2009, p.373). Another worrying finding is that the students used much more mother tongue than English, and they were disappointed with the result. Eventually, students show a strong belief that they themselves should find opportunities to use their L2 outside class. Similarly, Munir (2006) highlighted that due to their Indonesian circles, Indonesian participants in his study revealed uncertainty that whether their language skills might develop, even if they stay longer in Australia. However, there is a lack of concern towards the length of stay abroad and its contributions to students' progress, which will be investigated in this research.

3) Study Abroad and Challenges

Study abroad tends to bring not only opportunities but also challenges for students. Recently, the literature on international students' experiences in UK universities has been increasing and it somehow generates understandings of students' difficulties. Newsome and Cooper (2016) found a shocking fact from their well-conducted interviews that many of their international students reported "they were victims of racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and disingenuous marketing" (p. 211) and some students even chose to drop out of the course and returned home. To overcome their truly hard life there, students learned to accept the feelings of isolation and loneliness and to narrow their social expectations. International students also comment that Britain is a welcoming and friendly place, but the opportunities to experience the UK culture is restricted (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009). Therefore, they desire to have more interaction opportunities outside the university. In another study conducted in the same country into how international students immerse themselves in the local community, Wright and Schartner (2013) come to an alarming conclusion that participants have very low average hours of listening and speaking inside and outside the university. This problem may lead to a question about the quality of English-using interaction among overseas students in their particular community, which is calling for researchers' attention.

B. Interaction Opportunities

1) Theory of Interaction Opportunities

The fundamental notion of interaction opportunities was initially introduced in the book named - Identities and

Interactions (McCall & Simmons, 1966, cited by Philips, 1969). Interaction opportunities were defined as the availability of social interactions and participation with others in a community, which may differ people from one another. There are several social factors affecting the quality of interaction opportunities, including social class, work career or leisure (Derek, 1969). It is emphasised that the positive feelings stemming from social participation will forcefully influence the individuals' level of happiness. The present study uses this theory as a framework to examine the nature of students' experiences, questioning to what extent Vietnamese overseas students feel satisfied with their interaction opportunities in the English-speaking environment. Therefore, in this study, the theory of 'interaction opportunities' will be developed with the present of L2 practice in a new cultural context.

Along with language employed within academic course, cultural interaction opportunity is one of the key differences between study abroad context and study at a home country. According to Engle and Engle's framework to categorize study-abroad programs, "focused and reflective interaction with the host culture is finally what separates study abroad from study at home" (Engle and Engle, 2003:4). Indeed, regular out-of-class interaction with the local cultural community brings about outstanding benefits, including better knowledge of local cultures, a sense of self-confidence (Yang et al., 2006) and a willingness to use target language (Naomi, 2010; Kang, 2014). Recalling the profits of gaining interactions in the theory, overseas students may enjoy meaningful experience with the growth of belonging sense and self-confidence. However, above research is likely to assume that in case contact with local people is accessible, practising L2 and seizing interaction opportunities will be trouble-free.

2) *Lack of interaction opportunities in English when studying abroad*

Fewer chances to communicate with local people were seen than initially expected by overseas students (Kinging, 2008; Amuzie and Winke, 2009). Surprisingly, Rosenthal et al. (2006) found that approximately a third of over 800 international students in Melbourne university had no interaction with local students on-campus and a larger number had none off-campus. They admitted that they regularly use English to contact with other international students whereas their exposure to the English spoken by local peers was restricted. Yates & Wahid (2013) added that "not only were there few opportunities to speak in class, but outside the class, they also found little opportunity to speak English with native speakers" (p.1043) which reveals that students had minimal access and engagement in the community. In terms of educational institutions' responsibility, Magnan (2008) criticises the institution for the reality that overseas language learners are not provided with an entrance into communities in the target language society. This reality contrasts with both students' expectation (Yates and Wahid, 2013), and goals of second language teaching - "helping learners become sensitive, and understanding interaction in other languages and societies" (Magnan, 2008, p.355).

Numerous individual and social difficulties in promoting interaction opportunities frequently confront international students. Firstly, study abroad learners often spend time with other peers from the same or similar cultural and language background (Myles and Cheng, 2003; Tan and Goh, 2006). Secondly, internationals report that local students are likely to be uninterested in them and underestimate their efforts to make contact or willing to maintain the contact (Marginson et al., 2010). Thirdly, linguistic barriers and pragmatics shortage may prevent internationals from understanding when and how people converse, what they talk about; therefore, seeking suitable topics and strategies for meaningful conversations becomes problematic (Halualani et al., 2004). Last but not least, local students seem to have already established friendship group; therefore, may not have a desire to interact or reach out to those who looks different or difficult to talk to (Yates and Wahid, 2013). In 2011, Varghese and Brett surveyed students from 34 universities in Australia and found that international students possibly encountered greater struggle in building friendship with native speakers. In contrast with Varghese and Brett's (2011), Myles and Cheng (2003) explained that international students did not made an intentional effort to communicate with local peers.

To explain for obstacles preventing overseas students from seeking interaction opportunities, previous researchers highlight the contextual influence of the length of the course, accommodation (Newsome and Cooper, 2016) and personal factors such as goals, language proficiency and cultural identity. In terms of the length of study abroad, Regan et al. (2006) suggest that a full year abroad is moderately short for students to attain meaningful interactions and take full advantage of the English-speaking environment. The reason is that it takes time for them to create connection with local people. Likewise, after short-term programmes organised in English-speaking countries, international students could not integrate properly into host country social networks (Kinging, 2008). In addition to the course length, students' personal goals and efforts have contributed significantly to their progress in social exchange. To improve learners' interaction quality, they must realize their own roles, their goals and responsibilities to take initiatives (Amuzie and Winke, 2009; Yates and Wahid, 2013; Magnan et al., 2012). Therefore, both contextual and personal elements could be the culprit of interactional problems abroad.

Consequences of lacking interaction opportunities

The consequences of a lack of community engagement are worth-mentioning. Learners' failure to interact with local people while studying abroad is often discouraging the learners, and contradicts their expectation (Collentine and Freed, 2004). A lack of interactions may also prevent students from expanding their cultural understanding and spoken competence (Marginson, 2011) although students enrolling in foreign language classes report that their two prioritised goals are to gain cultural knowledge and to integrate into that speech community. This expectation may not be achieved if students cannot access to interaction opportunities in the

community. Another disadvantage is that international students who share abundant time with the same first language speakers show less progress in English proficiency and less confidence in their language skills (Storch & Hill, 2008). Additionally, it may affect students' future employment opportunities or the use of English language in their specific professions (Yates & Wahid, 2013). Recognizing the negative consequences of lacking communication practice outside universities, Thorne (2009) urged to encourage students to maintain contact with their multilingual communities as a necessary way to become lifelong language learners.

3) Interaction opportunities with English as Lingua Franca (ELF)

Communication occurred within other EFL speakers is becoming widely and is beneficial to international students in various aspects when they communicate with other internationals. In terms of language skills, overseas students' language identity is influenced remarkably by an ELF context. They changed perceptions of themselves as foreign language users who dynamically negotiate the word meaning to overcome their language deficiencies (Virkkula and Nikula, 2010). In terms of social supports, Montgomery and McDowell (2009) interestingly emphasise the importance of international communities whose members use ELF. The international students in their research showed a significant engagement and appreciation in supportive social networks which do not necessarily include UK students. Those social networks assist international students in various situations to cope with difficulties in daily life and academic setting. Interactions among students from different nationalities also help promote students' intercultural knowledge instead of the local culture merely. In a different study, Schweisfurth and Gu (2009) found that many participants proudly see themselves as global citizens together with greater confidence.

Despite those obvious benefits of ELF-using interaction, several students do not find those interactional occasions in EFL helpful for their language development because their spoken mistakes were not corrected (Yates & Wahid, 2013). Additionally, it appears that the amount of EFL-using interaction is restricted within the campus and cannot fulfil students' curiosity about the local culture. In general, how international students perceive the usefulness of ELF-using interactions depends greatly on individual willingness and university support.

The above literature on various internationals may comprise little general insight into the interactional experience in both higher education and short-term courses in English-speaking countries. However, it does provide this study with a context in which to locate Vietnamese international students with their experience in the UK.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The present study is based on a group of Vietnamese students who spent from several months to around 2 years studying in the UK. This piece of research focuses on

students' perspectives about their informal interactions in English and their relevant cultural experiences. Specifically, the study compares VOS' expectations and their real experiences in language improvement, social network, community engagement and possible difficulties facing them. In sum, to shed light on the informal interaction opportunities in English in the UK that VOS enjoy, the present study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. What expectations of interaction opportunities in English, cultural knowledge and language achievement do VOS bring to the UK?
2. What are VOS' experience and attitudes toward interaction opportunities in English after arriving the UK?
3. To what extent are VOS satisfied with their achievement and experience after arriving the UK, in terms of their proficiency, cultural knowledge and community engagement?
4. Does the length of study abroad cause any difference to students' satisfaction about their improvement?

B. Participants

Participants were invited via a social media website of the VOS organisation in the UK and through the researcher's personal networks. Thirty eight VOS took part in the present study. The students recruited were from different regions in the UK with different language proficiency. Their IELTS speaking scores were from 5.5 to 8.5. They are attending either English preparation course or a university-level degree program such as undergraduate (N = 14), postgraduate (N = 22) and others (N = 2). The study also included participants from various academic backgrounds such as IT, Business Management, Law, Marketing, Linguistics, etc. Many studies have emphasised on groups of students in one university, but recruiting students from various universities in the UK assisted to comprehend similarities and differences in students' interactional experience in a broader societal context. To evaluate the influence of the length of studying on students' attitudes toward interaction opportunities they had, the participants were classified into three groups. Group 1 includes students who have been in the UK for around two years or more (N = 14); group 2 comprises students with around one year experiencing studying in the UK (N = 18), and group 3 with those staying for 6 months or less (N = 6). Those periods in this study were adopted based on the arguments from previous researchers (Isabelli, 2004; Pearson et al., 2006) that students with a year-long study abroad experience showed more language skills progress compared with those in a one-semester experience. In terms of interactions, after certain months, students had adequate time to experience informal interaction opportunities inside and outside their university.

C. Instruments

Understanding potential benefits of using a mixed methodology in explaining the changes in participants' perspectives (Dornyei, 2007; Silverman, 2013), the present study adopted both quantitative method

(Likert-scale questionnaire, N = 38) and qualitative method (a series of semi-structured interviews; N = 5), which follows an explanatory approach. Mixed methods research has been considered an appropriate approach in a social science study for its various contributions such as methodological triangulation (Dörnyei, 2007; Silverman, 2013). In this study, quantitative data from the questionnaire were first examined for the overall responses in a large scale of participants. It resulted in significant differences and surprising phenomena among students' perspectives before and during studying overseas. Those quantitative data provided a context for qualitative exploration later. As Silverman (2013) indicates, the quantitative method may not reflect the attributions of individuals fully. Therefore, qualitative method was employed as a main instrument in this study to investigate individual variables which may impact their perspectives. Other purposes are to demonstrate unique experiences (Newsome and Cooper, 2016) and to give explanations for participants' possible changes.

Specifically, the questionnaire was designed to measure the various facets of the students' perspective, attitude and experience (see Appendix 1). Firstly, the students input their length of living in the UK, their university, their current course and their IELTS speaking entry score as background information. Secondly, students answered questions about what they had expected about the interaction opportunities in the university and the community while in their home country (Vietnam), and about what they currently experience and their attitudes about interaction opportunities in English in informal settings during study abroad sojourn. The last part is about their difficulties they encountered. The questionnaire was developed based on various questionnaires investigating international learner beliefs and attitudes (Kaypak & Ortactepe, 2014; Rosenthal et al., 2006; Tragant, 2012). Several questions remained intact while others were modified to match with the purpose of this research. In each question, students responded on a 5-point Likert-scale: 1-Strongly agree, 2-Agree, 3-Neutral, 4-Disagree, 5-Strongly disagree. The pilot group was requested to provide comments on the initial version of the questionnaire to find any probable unclear or ambiguous points. Finally, adjustments were made to finalize the questionnaire.

The main aim of conducting interview is to explore individual variables that may have an impact on learner's perspectives in depth. In other words, interviews were used to investigate into unsuspected phenomena or issues emerging from the questionnaire. Through interviews, subjective opinions and definitions may support the researcher in uncovering individuals' distinctive experience (Pham, 2013). Another profound reason is that interviews help bridge the possible social gap among the researcher and participants (Silverman, 2013). In addition, following a semi-structured nature, it is flexible for changes and expansion along with the needs of the circumstances. In this study, being designed to assist researcher's understanding of reasons behind respondents' statements, the interview was a main instrument and was directed by questions that stemmed from the individual participants' responses to the questionnaires. Questions in the interview attempts to investigate where and how or how often they use English, what they are doing to

improve their speaking skills and possible difficulties they are facing, and how satisfied they are with their current experience in interaction opportunities in the UK. The questions were open-ended to offer participants the opportunity to recall their memories, to fully reflect their experiences and explain their ideas. In brief, this study needs to highlight VOS' perceptions, understanding and reflections in a relation to their interactional experiences in the UK, therefore, interviewing helps access students' experience in-depth that quantitative studies may not easily provide.

D. Procedure

The participants were provided with the 47-item questionnaire online to complete and submit. Data screening also was implemented to select qualified responses from the questionnaire. Those responses which were finished carelessly with unacceptable amount of missing answers were eliminated. After sumitting the questionnaire, each participant was asked to volunteer for an interview. Fourteen participants agreed.

Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were one-to-one, audio-taped and transcribed. Each interview was conducted within 20 minutes. These interviews were organised with the participation of six VOS students recruited from the same cohort of students mentioned above. One is male; five are female. They were selected purposely from a pool of 14 volunteers because they were active and enthusiastic in answering questions in the questionnaire. They also represented different background such as different accommodation types, length of staying and course levels. To be specific, one is living in dormitory; five is living in apartment. Two have been living in the UK for two years, three have been living for one years and one has been living in the UK for six months. One is studying undergraduate in Architecture. Another five are pursuing their graduate degree in Law, Marketing, Communication and Education in different universities. In other words, participants were chosen carefully to achieve the variation of participants' experience. However, ages, approximately similar across participants, and gender were not considered as variables in the selection process. All participants agreed to speak English in the interview, instead of Vietnamese. The interviews were conducted with full explanation about the topics and purposes at the beginning of the interview. They were also told to be guaranteed for the confidentiality of their identities. It is necessary to mention that all participants' information and answers are genuine, except for their name, which are pseudonyms as they required. After that phase, the audio data were converted to written word-for-word transcripts for data analysis purposes (see Appendix 4). However, grammar mistakes in several quoted speeches used in the next chapters were corrected to make the meaning clearer. The interview is organised in a chronological way as demonstrated in the table I and a detailed content in Appendix 3:

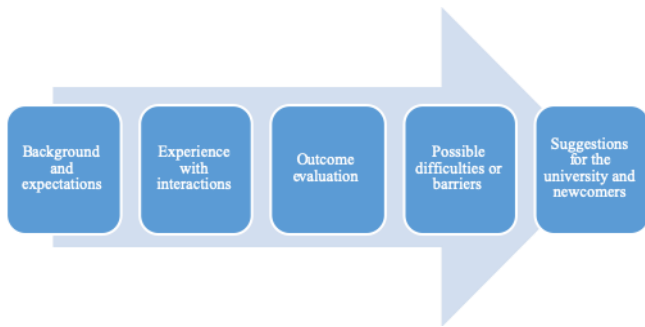


Fig. 1 The Sequence of Interviews

E. Data Analysis

Two types of data collected for this study are quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative data from interviews. IBM SPSS Statistics 22 software was employed to assist the analysis of quantitative data as it provides ‘underlying scientific understanding’ (Creswell, 2012, p.673). It helped produce both general descriptive analysis and factor analysis for details. For instance, mode and standard deviation (SD) were used to investigate the highest and lowest items in students’ expectation and their progress. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients were examined to compare students’ expectations and post-arrival evaluation, and to compare student groups with different length of stay. Cronbach’s alpha was also employed to test the reliability of the questionnaire which includes 47 questions. Based on the scale suggested by DeVellis (2012), the internal consistency of the responses in this study have shown to be highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.95$ for 10 expectation items; $\alpha = 0.903$ for 37 reality items).

In addition, all interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Inductive thematic analysis is applied to facilitate the identification of repeated motifs which are remarkable in the participants’ stories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, cited by Kaypak & Ortactepe, 2014). In this study, evaluating data thematically with an inductive approach helped provide an insight into the students’ own perspectives and experience about interaction opportunities during their study abroad sojourns. Each interview was analysed individually based on what was spoken, rather than the context of questions and language style. To achieve it, audio data of students’ own words and own definitions were listened repeatedly until the themes were discovered. Recurring patterns and distinctive features in students’ descriptive stories were examined and interpreted to produce the results and conclusive comments. From students’ narrative answers, their experiences with interaction opportunities were interpreted in the broader contexts, examining their interaction with other internationals, co-nationals, and British taken placed inside and outside the university.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A. Research Question 1

What expectations of interaction opportunities in English, cultural knowledge and language achievement do VOS bring to the UK?

Table I. Students' expectations about study abroad

Expectations	N	Mean	SD
I wanted to speak English like native speakers.	38	1.737	1.083
I thought studying abroad would enrich my cultural knowledge.	38	1.816	1.036
I thought I would spend a lot of time on social events.	38	2.737	1.058
I planned to speak English at home and in the university.	38	2.210	1.189
I thought I would have many interaction opportunities in English in the UK.	38	1.790	1.094
One of my reasons to choose studying broad was to get more informal interaction opportunities in English.	38	1.974	1.127

(1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree)

It can be seen from the table that students had various expectations before arriving the UK, with different degrees in different factors. Their highly diverse explanations could be found in the interviews, as mentioned below. In general, the participants expected a significant improvement in language ability and culture competence rather than expected to enjoy social interaction and local community.

In terms of culture, most of students desired to enrich their cultural knowledge when studying abroad (M=1.816). The difference of culture and lifestyle among two countries has been revealed to be one of the focal reasons they chose to study in the UK. One student even mentioned the favourable educational environment and British people’s politeness which differ from her home country. Therefore, one striking theme is that students desired to meet people from different cultural backgrounds, including local cultures and global cultures.

“maybe because the culture is quite different between Vietnam and the UK and the lifestyle as well. Like in Vietnam, it is more (about the) history, (...) I think it is not polite like in the UK.” (Student A)

“I just expected I would be in the environment with people (who) speak English, and... all the time, in the daily life (...) and meet people from different cultures.” (Student D)

“culture is the major thing I considered before I chose the destination for my Master’s course” (Student F)

As for interactions and competence, they believed that interaction opportunities in English in the UK could be found easily (M=1.790) and it became one of reasons for their decision to study in the UK (M=1.947). More than 80% participants expected to speak English confidently in a nativelike way after studying abroad, as demonstrated below.

I wanted to speak English like native speakers. (38 responses)

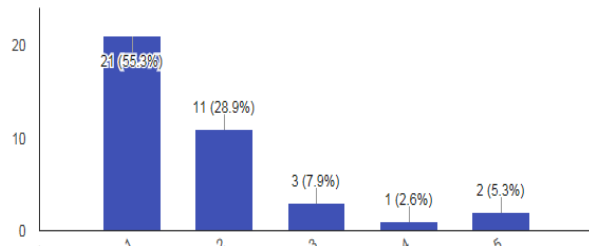


Fig. 2 Students' expectation to speak English like native speakers

Moreover, around 63% students expected to use English both at home and in the university. One of the interviewee even planned to speak English 'all the time, in the daily life' in order to take advantages of English-speaking environment and to enhance her proficiency. In the interview, there is a consensus theme that students possessed positive attitudes towards interaction opportunities with internationals and host friends that they would gain. Especially, all six students mentioned a desire to meet "native speakers", to make friends and to participate in the local community.

"...the major thing, because studying in the UK, you have the chance to practice English with the native speakers" (Student F)

"I can meet so many people, so many native speakers and I can talk to them to improve my English. So I think I will be more confident when I came here." (Student B)

"I expected to make some more friends... I wanted to join more in the community that I can speak more, communicate more, so that my English proficiency can be more enhanced. Yeah I did expect about that because this is English environment." (Student E)

However, with the survey results, it is surprising that 60% students showed their uncertainty and disagreement with an intention to spend a lot of time on social events (M=2.737, table D). The reasons might be discovered from students' answers. One participant worried that spending a lot of time on social events can influence her study. She also established higher expectations on her own personal development, rather than on communication with other people around her.

"I think it's (expectation is) more about myself, rather than communicating with other people. I expected to like learn English better, learn more social skills for myself, and become independent. [...] the main reason (why I did not intend to spend a lot of time for social interaction) is because I think it will affect my study." (Student C)

It is now essential to examine how students experience in the reality and how their attitude changed after arriving the UK.

B. Research Question 2

What are VOS' experiences and attitudes toward interaction opportunities in English after arriving the UK?

Table II. Students' overall perspectives about the interaction opportunities

	N	Mean	SD
Face-to-face informal interaction opportunities in English are important.	38	1.737	.828
I find many opportunities to communicate in English with friends.	38	2.158	1.197
Generally, I feel satisfied with my social interactions in the UK.	38	2.579	1.154
Informal social interactions have helped me improve my English skills.	38	2.237	.883

1) Positive dimensions of VOS attitudes and experience

It is observed that after arriving the UK, students highly agreed about the importance of face-to-face informal interaction (M = 1.737). This finding is different from their expectation they had about interaction before they arrived. As can be seen from the expectation in research question 1, students in the survey were likely to concern less about informal interaction activities such as social events. After they arrived, they realised the importance of informal interaction and found opportunities to communicate in English with friends, which reflects their positive attitude towards taking up interaction opportunities. However, their experience and their efforts vary from person to person.

All six students in the interviews reported that they often went to bars, pubs, restaurants and cafés with their local and international friends. One participant - the only student living in the dorm revealed that she used English to communicate frequently and sometimes celebrated special events with flatmates. Those activities provide Vietnamese students in the UK with meaningful opportunities to entertain, to speak English and to learn different cultures in the meantime.

"I go to the bar, pub or club with them (international friends) or go to restaurant with them" (Student A)

"I go to the restaurant, or the bar, club, I can meet so many people, and I can communicate with them" (Student B)

"I learn most of the things about the British culture based on social activities here. (...) I think (I use English) quite a lot because like I live in the dorm with other international students. So English is the main language we use to communicate" (Student C)

Another emergent theme was that some students in this study took a proactive role in seeking for opportunities to communicate with locals and internationals as they participated in volunteer and religious organisations or had part-time jobs. Their part-time jobs not only provided them with opportunities to practice conversational English but also helped them gain cultural knowledge and widen their social network. Surprisingly, their international friends or co-workers taught them about the local culture, not British people.

"I got a part-time job so I think it is a good way to improve my English skills". (Student A)

"I often visit some café, club for international students at the Jesmond church. most of people, they are British you can talk to them. You can ask them more about the cultures, and they teach you how to play some British games". (Student

C)

“...when I did volunteer, (I met) people from different (country), European countries like France, Germany, yeah, like most of them like from the different countries.... Local culture? (I learn from) my international friends who live here for a long time. Or the people who live here (...) when I have part-time job.” (Student D)

As shown in the Table II, participants highly agreed that informal social interactions have helped them improve their English skills (M = 2.237; SD = .883). As for cultural competence, the benefits were mentioned by student A who is the most proactive student in social communication. She felt that she now became polite after learning British culture, and that she nearly did not experience any cultural shock. Another topic emerged in some active VOS students was that they did not consider cultural difference a significant matter since cultural problems only appeared in a couple of first months and did not last long. Each of them found their own way to accept or overcome cultural shock, which reflects their dynamic movement.

“I think when I come here, I am quite polite. I think it is better (than) when I was in Vietnam. (...). I nearly don't have anything like cultural shock.” (Student A)

“At first, I guess it's cultural shock. But it did not last long because then you just get used to it... I think I find the way to accept it. Because like when you just live in a different country, it is easier for you to find a way to get along and live with it”. (Student D)

One student even had preparations for cultural shock when she had been in her home country. It seems that her previous contacts with internationals helped her become well-adapted with the new environment in the UK.

“...A little bit (cultural shock), (...) cultural shock is not really a problem which I have to face with, because when I was in Vietnam, I had some international friends, (...) I learned somehow about the culture.” (Student E)

Those findings challenge Wright and Schartner's (2013) conclusion about international students' reluctance to take up interaction opportunities and Montgomery's (2010) about a lack of availability of the opportunities. However, how their interaction in English can improve their skills and how satisfied VOS were with their improvement should be examined in the next parts.

2) Challenges in VOS' informal interaction opportunities in English

Table III. Student interactions in English in reality

	N	Mean	SD
I always use English at home here in the UK.	38	3.079	1.343
I participate in social events in the university actively.	38	3.105	1.311
I often participate in local events outside the university.	38	3.000	1.336
I feel it easier to hang out with people having similar Asian cultural background.	38	2.158	1.027

Despite their awareness of the importance of informal

interaction in English, there was a conflict between students' expectations and the reality. About 70% participants were not highly active in both university and local social events. One important finding is that many students did not frequently use English outside the university (Table III).

When comparing the responses for the statement ‘I planned to speak English at home and in the university.’ in the expectation and those for ‘I always use English at home here in the UK.’, Pearson correlation analysis revealed that despite a technically positive correlation, there is a highly weak relationship among students' responses for those two statements ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.01$, Table IV). This noticeable gap might give rise for concern: the opportunities for students to speak English at their accommodation are moderately limited although practicing English during their stay abroad was initially mentioned as a top priority for a majority of students.

Table IV. Correlations between students' initial plan and their English use in reality

		I planned to speak English at home and in the university.	I always use English at home here in the UK.
I planned to speak English at home and in the university.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1	.463**
	N	38	38
I always use English at home here in the UK.	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.463**	1
	N	38	38

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

In general, five out of six interviewees emphasized a lack of opportunities to communicate in English. They spoke Vietnamese at home and all of the interviewees spent most of their time with Vietnamese friends, even the one living in the dormitory. This is largely due to perceived cultural challenging many students.

“... (I spent most of time) with my Vietnamese friends. (...) We go shopping together, and study together (...) and travelling. Because I am living with my Vietnamese friends, so I just speak Vietnamese in my home.” (Student B)

“Basically, I spend most of my time with my Vietnamese friends. Because as I said before, it is cultural differences that make it hard for me to spend time with other international students.” (Student C)

To explain for this phenomenon, a student revealed that she wanted to meet Vietnamese friends when she came back home after a long day speaking English in studio. This can be categorised for the purpose of emotional support among the VOS community. However, students admitted that speaking Vietnamese at home



could not help them improve English skills, and it was difficult to practice English with Vietnamese housemates.

"I prefer living Vietnamese people because in my major, I'm just at the studio in the university (...) so I speak English all day, so I want to speak Vietnamese when (...) I come back home" (Student A)

Apart from cultural distance, many students attempted to explain language barriers that they encountered. Two interviewees revealed that they had difficulties understanding slang and jokes of local students. Even competent students with 8.0 IELTS speaking score also faced problems related to local accents and speaking speed.

"... when I talk with my friends, like British friends. She said some kinds of joke. And I couldn't get it. I don't find it funny at all. But she finds it funny. And when I tell some jokes, and she can't find it funny. (...) It makes you feel uncomfortable, being together with someone when they cannot actually understand you. So that's why I don't want to communicate with them anymore." (Student C)

"...it is about the way they talk which is too fast, and the slang, the word." (Student D)

For those who were not proficient in listening and speaking, they found more difficulties in communication such as their confidence and their misunderstanding. Insufficient language preparation was mentioned by one student as a culprit of her communication failure. After their arrival, when attempting to communicate with local people, students lost their confidence when locals did not understand them.

"...I've studied English for 10 years with Vietnamese teachers. (...) they are teachers but they are still Vietnamese. Anh they have some troubles with accent and pronunciation. So it affects the way we pronounce a word (...) I speak slowly, and they have to try and be patient to listen to what I say, and sometimes I pronounce a word in wrong ways. So they don't understand, they always say that 'what? What', and I feel so embarrassed." (Student B)

"... I feel very confident in speaking. But when I encounter difficulties when I speak. I don't understand what they say or they don't understand what I say, I lost the confidence. A little bit like stuck in the conversation." (Student D)

3) Social interaction in intercultural context and English used as lingua franca

The result indicates that more than 60% students often felt comfortable when hanging out with people from similar cultural background (see Fig. 3).

I feel it easier to hang out with people having similar Asian cultural background.
(38 responses)

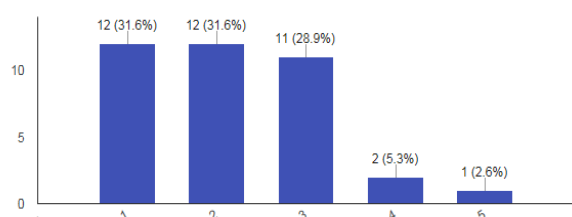


Fig. 3 Students' perception on building friendships with people from Asia

This interesting theme also emerged in the interviews when students were asked about their friendships with Asian people. A majority of students reported that it was easier for them to find Asian friends than British friends. This contrasts with their desire to learn local cultural knowledge and make friends with local people as one of their expectation mentioned above. The responses in the interviews might somehow help explain this paradox.

"when I talk with the Chinese students. Their English is not very good (...) but somehow feel connected with them. You can still feel comfortable being around them" (Student C)

Students found it difficult to explain why they feel connected with other Asian students. They supposed that their culture, thinking, religion and action were moderately similar, which facilitated their willing of communication and mutual understanding; whereas cultural barriers prevented them from communicating and making friends with British friends although they perceived that British people were friendly and kind. One student even highlighted that it was cultural difference, not language deficiency that caused communication disappointment.

"...it is easier for people from Asian (countries) to communicate, to talk with each other. (...) we feel connected. We somehow act in the same, or similar (...) You can communicate in many ways, (...) we can use sign language. You can use facial expression or hand gesture. It is not necessarily about language." (Student C)

"...in some Asian country, it is a little bit easier for us to make friend because we know the culture. And we just like meet in the street... and we can make friends with them. But here, everybody seems more, I don't know, like kind of private, kind of thing. So it is not just like, come up to the person, talk to them, and then become friends (...) it is a little bit hard to make friends." (Student D)

Moreover, language problems and misunderstanding are rarely found when VOS communicated with other Vietnamese friends or internationals. For example, those who use English as lingua franca were supposed to experience the similar language obstacles; therefore, they spoke English slower in a clear and direct way without much slangs and idioms. This language adjustment can be considered a virtuous willingness to communicate (Kang, 2014) and a springboard for mutual understanding and close contacts later.

"... when you talk with international friends, they speak slower (...) so it is easy to listen or speak to them." (Student A)

"... people are second-language (English) speakers. So sometimes we understand the language barrier, so we try to speak slowly sometime" (Student D)

However, one student still believed that the best way to practise English was to make friends with British friends and to communicate with them, instead of being with internationals. She explained that those who were non-native English speakers might not recognise and correct her mistakes in English expression. Therefore, in this study, English used as *lingua franca*

was considered less helpful in helping students improving language, but was valued as a means of building friendships with other internationals for emotional supports.

“... if you want to improve your English skills, you should make friend with the Britain. I think it is the best. Sometimes, when you speak something and you don't know: Maybe it is wrong. (...) your (international) friends don't know how to fix it for you. But just (...) British friends, they realise it is wrong and they fix it for you.” (Student A)

C. Research Question 3

To what extent are VOS satisfied with their achievement and experience after arriving the UK, in terms of their proficiency, cultural knowledge and community engagement?

1) Language Proficiency

Table V. Students' self-evaluations on their proficiency development

Progress	N	Mean	SD
Speaking ability	38	2.158	1.132
Listening ability	38	1.868	.935
Ability to express in English	38	2.265	1.083
Be satisfied with the improvement	38	2.553	1.224

It is apparent in the table V that the overall response about students' progress was slightly positive, especially with main language skills such as speaking and listening. After certain time spending in the UK, student found it easy to express themselves in English. It seems that study abroad made a contribution to their improvement in language skills to some extent. However, as can be seen from the last index, there was a wide range in students' satisfaction degrees, evident in the high standard deviations (M=2.553, SD =1.224). Eleven out of 38 students reported their disagreement and strong disagreement with the statement that “I am satisfied with the language improvement so far”, together with five students having neutral ideas about their improvement. This highly diverse answer was recognized and reexamined in the in-depth interviews for students' reflections and explanations.

Surprisingly, when the participants were asked about their improvement in language ability so far, only two respondents showed their satisfaction while the majority modestly emphasised that the improvement was ‘little’, ‘a bit’ or insignificant. Those who gained positive outcomes mentioned that they took advantage of opportunities to practice English as much as they could. One optimistic students even recognised the drawbacks of their previous learning styles in home country, which focused excessively on reading and writing skills.

“...after a year when I finished the Foundation, I think my English skill is better like I can communicate with the native speaker better (...) because when I studied in Vietnam, we just focused on the reading and writing, we don't have any chance to practice listening or speaking. But when we come here, we can practice it.” (Student A)

On the other hand, a majority of students commented that their language competence hadn't improved as they expected.

This important theme could be explained by a lack of proper practice in English speaking and listening skills. One student who initially thought she would speak English all the time when she came to the UK, revealed that she now used English less than what she had expected as she attended several hours a week in the university and spent most of her time at home with other Vietnamese students.

“...my English has not improved much since I arrived here. I think it is better in reaction and response in English, but not really improve it. I think (my ability has improved) less than I expected. But I guess it is because most of the time I spend at home with my friends. And with the Master's programme, you just stay three days at the university (...) if you don't spend time to interact with people (...) you don't have to use English.” (Student D)

“...I don't have many native speaker friends. Yeah so I speak Vietnamese every day. And I think, it is not enough to improve my English to another higher level”. (Student B)

“...I think I'm kind of improved just a little bit. But not much.” (Student C)

“...I would not say that I am improved in those fields... I'm not really satisfied with what my English has been improved.” (Student E)

2) Cultural knowledge and students' engagement

Table VI. Students' engagement with the cultural community

	N	Mean	SD
I feel British people are friendly to talk with.	37	2.432	1.119
I have many local friends.	38	3.263	1.201
I have many international friends.	38	2.421	1.056
I feel I belong here at the university.	38	2.737	1.223
I feel engaged with my local community in the UK.	38	2.632	1.101
I feel satisfied with my improvement in culture knowledge	38	1.974	.716

As shown in the table VI, students were highly satisfied with their cultural experience in the UK. However, there was a lack of contact with British friends (M=3.263) although some students were initially highly motivated to meet locals. This phenomenon was explained by interviewees with two common reasons. Firstly, British students already established their friend groups, which made it difficult for VOS to join in. Secondly, a cultural distance prevented them from making friends with British friends even though 57% students admitted that British people were friendly to talk with (M=2.432). Therefore, two reasons above might lead to VOS' slightly low sense of belonging to the UK universities and local communities.

To further examine the relationship of having local friends and a sense of community, students' responses for two statements ‘I have many local students’ and ‘I feel belong to the community’ were used for Pearson correlation calculation. The result is presented in the table below.



Table VII. Correlation between having local friends and a sense of community

		I Have Many Local Friends.	I Feel Engaged With My Local Community in The UK.
I have many local friends.	Pearson Correlation	1	.648**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	38	38
I feel engaged with my local community in the UK.	Pearson Correlation	.648**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	38	38

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

As can be seen from the table VII, the correlation value is positive ($r = 0.648$, $p < 0.01$), which means there is a tendency that the more local friends students have, the higher sense of belonging to the local community they possess. Similarly, for those who do not have many local friends, their sense of engagement with the UK might be lower.

However, there is an encouraging point appearing from the interviews that VOS received strong supports from their friends and institutions. It seems that most universities where students study have organised cultural activities and provided well-being service to help students to deal with personal problems. Similarly, tutors are reported to be excellently responsible for assisting students. It is estimated that nearly 60% students agreed in the survey that their universities helped them engage with their community. However, more than half of respondents also needed more support from their universities to connect with other people.

“Even my classmates. They are very kind. They are willing to help me. They talk to me, even I don’t like talk to them. They always said that ‘why, why you don’t talk too much, you have to speak English. You have to try to, like, to be more open, and talk more confident. (...) if you cannot explain, we can help you.” (Student B)

Despite respectable supports from UK universities, if students do not take advantage of those supports, they may strand in the circle of problems and find it difficult to escape. A student coping many difficulties in adapting with British culture rejected to discuss with her tutor about it.

“... I don’t think that is necessary for me to contact with the tutor or academic support at the school. I prefer to separate my studying and my personal life”. (Student C)

Last but not least, students suggest many helpful advice for prospective VOS who are planning to study in the UK. Many interviewees encourage prospective VOS to be confident to take up interaction opportunities and be well-prepared for obstacles ahead, together with setting practical expectations about themselves and the community.

D. Research Question 4

Does the length of study abroad cause any difference to students’ satisfaction about their improvement?

Table VIII. How the length of stay influences students’ satisfaction

	Group 1 (N = 14)		Group 2 (N = 18)		Group 3 (N=6)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
My speaking skills have improved significantly	2.14	1.03	1.83	0.92	3.17	1.47
I am satisfied with my progress in English competence so far.	2.50	1.29	2.28	1.02	3.50	1.38
I feel satisfied with my social interactions in the UK.	2.29	0.99	2.50	1.10	3.50	1.39

(Group 1: about two years; Group 2: about one year; Group 3: less than six months)

Vietnamese students’ length of staying in the UK has significant impacts on their communication improvement and meaningful interaction experiences. The table above compares the satisfaction levels of different student groups on their speaking skills, overall competence and social interactions. To be specific, students in group 3 with less than 6 months staying in the UK showed their dissatisfaction in their language progress as well as their interactions in English. By contrast, students in group 1 and 2, who stayed longer in the UK, revealed their relatively high satisfaction in their development and interactional experience. One possible reason is that during the first six months, students might face difficulties in adapting to the new environment (Kinginger, 2008). It is also noticeable from the interviews that there are many different viewpoints towards the length of staying within each group.

“I think it’s not enough for me to understand the social life in here. Because I’ve just lived in here two years.” (Student A, in group 1)

“It may take time (for me) to really belong to the culture” (Student D, in group 1)

Two students above with around two years staying abroad still felt that a two-year period was inadequate to make a significant difference to their language development and experiences and that they need more time to learn culture. Whereas, student from group F and student E from group 3 revealed that they found many opportunities to speak English such as part-time jobs and to learn culture from other friends. Therefore, the length of study might be impactful; however, learners’ personal goals, attitudes and awareness of social interactions can be taken into account as an echo of a previous study (Yates and Wahid, 2013).

The results in this chapter indicate that students’ expectations and living experiences are relatively different. Many students are not satisfied with their proficiency improvement and interactional experiences. As a consequence, they are moving from seeking opportunities to speak English with local people to communicating with other international friends. Gradually, international communities are built, appreciated and strengthened based on language and cultural similarity as all of the speakers



use English as lingua franca.

V. FURTHER DISCUSSION

A. Discussion of Findings

This study aimed to identify the possible gaps between VOS' expectations and their experience in terms of informal interaction opportunities after a certain period of time spending in British universities. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, following an explanatory approach. However, one-to-one interview was the main instrument. Comparisons of participants' answers have offered an overall as well as a deep insight into students' expectations and experiences. A key difference is that VOS set high expectation on improving their skills and interaction opportunities; however, they face many problems in communicating in English. They also find less interaction opportunities than they expected. In turn, many VOS are not satisfied with their English interactions, their progress in language competency and local cultural understanding.

To be more specific, there is a tendency for most students to set expectations as being 'native-like' speakers, which has become debates for decades. However, like participants in many previous studies (Newsome and Cooper, 2016; Tragant, 2012; Amuzie and Winke, 2009), VOS found it difficult to access to British people and develop friendships with them. The study supports Yates and Wahid's opinion (2013) about the difficulty in approaching host student groups. However, there is a positive movement that some VOS have repositioned themselves proactively to seize interaction opportunities so as to practise English, to enrich intercultural knowledge and to broaden their circle of friends. They participate social clubs, charity and religion programmes, for instance. Those students are likely to overcome cultural and language problems easier than other passive counterparts. Therefore, study abroad experience can be exhaustive and meaningful, particularly when students become dynamic in forming points of connection with other English speakers beyond the boundaries of the campus and the confine of 'native' friends.

The availability of interaction opportunities in English in the UK is proven to be plentiful, in recalling of the theory of interaction mentioned in chapter 2. However, since different mother tongues and a cross-cultural context emerge in those interactions, the communicators face serious relevant problems and have to deal with their consequences. Cultural difference and language barriers can be highlighted as two main elements preventing students from taking up interaction opportunities. Most of students, even English proficient ones, encounter difficulties in accustoming themselves to British people' speed, accents and slangs. Apart from language obstacles, some students cannot adapt with the new culture, which leads them to the sense of isolation (Wright and Schartner, 2013; Newsome and Cooper, 2016). For example, when students in this study do not have contact with the locals, students feel less engaged with their local society. This feeling of isolation and unhappiness of students in the community was predicted in the theory of 'interaction opportunities' (Derek, 1969) as a consequence of lack of interaction opportunities.

When encountering cultural problems, there are two different approaches that students in this study utilise. A majority of VOS choose to accept the differences, learn how their co-nationals deal with it, or even negotiate with people from new cultures about the barrier. As a result, those students have integrated excellently in the environment and are satisfied with their experiences in the UK. On the other hand, a minority of VOS students choose to give up learning new cultures and avoid interacting with British people, as also illustrated in Wright and Schartner's article (2013). Indeed, sociocultural adaptation has been documented in many case studies (Montgomery, 2010; Kinginger, 2008). However, a distinctive finding in this study is that VOS are learning British cultures through their Vietnamese friends who have stayed longer in the UK. They also learn British cultures from their colleagues and international friends. Therefore, as for Vietnamese students, their intercultural competence can be enhanced vigorously without help from the locals. This reflects social and personal dynamics in Vietnamese students' efforts to learn new culture.

In terms of interaction opportunities using English as lingua franca, although students underestimate the language learning purposes in informal interactions as their mistake in language expression are not corrected by other internationals, they prefer building international friendships and groups for social supports. This finding supports the claims that international students find it helpful to form internationals' network (Montgomery and McDowe, 2009) and it is necessary for VOS to maintain contact with the Vietnamese community in English-speaking countries for emotional needs (Pham, 2013). Indeed, VOS are highly aware of the importance of international students' networks because they can feel tremendously connected. This can be considered as an evident change in students' initial plans to adapt with the new intercultural environment. In addition, VOS in this study appreciate the effort of internationals when they see themselves as ELF speakers and try to speak English slowly and clearly. Therefore, language adjustment and similar cultural background are likely to be two reasons explaining why VOS appreciate the strength of international community and prefer building international friendships.

Another noticeable finding is that when being asked to self-evaluate their language development, students show their dissatisfaction with their slow progress. This should not come as a surprise since these students speak Vietnamese at home in the UK and spend most of their time hanging out with Vietnamese friends. This result is similar to Myles and Cheng (2003) and Tan and Goh (2006) findings that overseas students spend most of their time with peers from same nations, which restrict their English practice. This finding also supports Tragant (2010)'s finding which emphasised little social interaction in English that overseas students enjoy outside the campus. Moreover, Vietnamese students highlight that some hours a week attending lectures and studying in the university are not sufficient to improve their skills to advance levels. On the other hand, it seems that VOS set moderately high expectations for their communication skills, which

calls for a re-examination of levels of 'expectations'. They strongly believe that part-time jobs can help with their English conversational language merely, for instance. They can react and response in English in daily conversation quickly. However, developing conversational language is not a principal target of many VOS students in this research. One interviewee's ambition is to be excellent when informally exchanging ideas about specific advanced topics. This encouraging point in students' intentions should be examined in future research regarding how Vietnamese students attempt to fulfil this ambition.

Finally, the importance of contacting with local friends are reflected in other studies (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Regant et al., 2009; Kinginger, 2008). It appears in this study that contact with British friends is paramount as it can provide large volume of input and facilitate natural interactions, which is favourable for language acquisition purposes and cultural exploration. VOS also have a desire to engage in sustained and meaningful ways with the host culture community. However, contact with the locals and cultural immersions are associated to the length of stay abroad. The study found that length of stay in the community impacts the quantity of interaction opportunities and the outcomes of cultural integration. A student who stays for a year or more, obtains a significant quantity of cultural communication and language exposure more than the one staying for six months or below, which is in common with findings from Regant et al. (2009). This generates students' different levels of satisfaction about informal interactions in English-speaking environment.

B. Recommendations

1) Preparation for a new life abroad

Studying abroad entails opportunities to live, learn and socialise with people from different cultural and language backgrounds. Those valuable experiences can change Vietnamese students' perspectives on a global community and contribute to their professional and personal development. However, the intensity of the experience diverges greatly among individual students, which leads to different levels of satisfaction and development. It is suggested that prospective students should prepare carefully for their journey in order to fully enjoy benefits from social and cultural diversities. Firstly, students in Vietnam are encouraged to sharpen their spoken and listening skills to build a better foundation for their future interactions in English. In case students are not confident with their skills, attending pre-session courses or language support courses are highly recommended. Secondly, students also need to be aware of cultural differences between Vietnam, Britain and other countries, especially Western countries. They should also prepare knowledge about cultural symbols in the host countries such as local cuisine, music, and sports, and communal repertoire such as cultural activities, symbols, stories and gesture interpretation. It is recommended that students should make friends with other internationals in Vietnam if possible, so that they obtain certain amount of intercultural knowledge and become more confident in a global village later. More importantly, since the

accommodation, one of contextual factors, affects considerably on the availability of interaction opportunities, students should consider choosing a suitable type of accommodation. Dormitory is suggested as a place where students are provided with chances to speak English frequently and to exchange cultures with some local friends and other internationals. By contrast, when deciding to stay with other Vietnamese students, they might prepare to sacrifice opportunities to practice English language. Finally, after arriving at the UK, students should confidently take full advantage of tutoring services and social clubs marketed by universities. This study has highlighted Vietnamese students' personal responsibilities to take up interaction opportunities because students' efforts and attitudes towards cultural and language obstacles will decide the meaningfulness of student life abroad.

2) University value-added support

Since the UK is renowned for its quality international education environment and its impressive cultures, universities should pay attention to students' difficulties in adapting and engaging with local communities. Since students' social adaptability becomes one criterion to decide the quality of a study abroad programme (Goldoni, 2013), providing them with language support in informal speaking and listening skills is necessary. Channels for cultural exchanges should also be created to help connect a range of students. Despite increasing financial costs for those actions, they could be considered as a long-term investment to the 'education products', helping UK universities gain competitive advantages in a growingly overcrowded market of international education.

By recognising students' failure to engage with the locals, universities are suggested to take initiatives in bringing groups of students closer. Proactive strategies and well-invested campaigns are highly recommended in order to maximise interactions between student groups. Language teachers, for example, can introduce useful tools and resources to learn language and cultures to Vietnamese students. Finally, Vietnam can be a lucrative market for international education providers since the desire of studying abroad is increasing (Nguyen, 2012). It is time British universities realised the necessity to cater for international students, in general, and Vietnamese students' social language skills and intercultural interactions, in particular. The investment in maximising students' experiences, happiness and achievements will reinforce the UK universities' status and reputation when positive comments from cohorts of satisfied VOS alumni are overwhelming.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

A. Study Aims and Findings

This research attempted to present the case of Vietnamese students during their stay in the UK. By focusing on students' experiences with informal interaction opportunities using mixed methods, this study adds on to the main body of existing literature on the international students' experience in

English-speaking countries. The findings shed light into Vietnamese students' expectations, experiences and attitudes toward interaction opportunities during their sojourns. The objective is to identify, from Vietnamese student's perspective, the factors influencing their interactions in English so that potential corrective solutions can be addressed to develop their language experience, their social well-being and even help enhance their academic performances. A broader objective of this research is to provide information which can facilitate global mobility in education to a certain extent.

Following four research questions, the study found interesting pictures in life of VOS in the UK in terms of their interactions and satisfaction. There is a significant discrepancy between VOS students' expectations and their real experiences. In terms of expectations, students wished to learn cultures, to meet many British friends to practice their English as well as to make friends with other international students. Initially, students might possess low expectations in social participations; however, they came to realize the importance of informal interaction opportunities in assisting them to practise English. It can be concluded that some Vietnamese students proactively take advantages of informal interaction opportunities in the UK as they participate in social, charity and religion events. Although many students compliment the friendliness of British people and the efficiency of university support, they are reluctant to build friendships and are dissatisfied with their improvements in communication ability. More importantly, many students are facing problems related to cultural differences and language obstacles, which leads to a low sense of belonging to the community as well as their low satisfaction with their achievement. However, an encouraging point is that each student seeks his or her own way to cope with those problems. Some choose to establish close friendships with co-national students and Asian students for emotional supports, while some strive to learn and become well-adapted to British cultures. The former action stems from a strong belief of shared cultural understanding and sympathy of non-native English speakers.

B. Limitations of this Study

There are several limitations to the present study. Due to the time limitation, the study may be moderately small-scale which possibly prevented the conduct of a more sophisticated statistical exploration. The reliability of the investigation is also possibly not guaranteed absolutely because of attainable small sample size. In addition, the influence of the length of the overseas study was explored by the comparison of three different groups at the same time instead of a longitudinal research investigating the same group at three different points of time. Therefore, participants' ideas before going abroad may not highly accurate when they recalled because of the interference of the time. Future studies might employ an experimental or longitudinal design to examine possible changes of one same student group. Moreover, the study did not specifically differentiate between undergraduate and graduate VOS with different language abilities and motives for choosing to study abroad, their responses might not necessarily represent for all Vietnamese students studying

overseas. Similarly, some other variables such as gender, prior knowledge or different departments such as engineering or humanities were not considered as independent variables while those factors might somehow impact the way students' experience in social and cultural interactions.

C. Suggestions for Future Research

The author believes that little is explored regarding many of the questions and phenomena related to interaction opportunities of international students in the UK. These tentative conclusions can build foundation for further and large-scale study into these important issues. Further investigation can be made with observational methods to find out how students are proactive in making interaction opportunities, and what strategies they use to take advantages of those opportunities. Researchers can investigate into the nature of the transitions students undergo and gain during their courses by other testing methods. Further research also can focus on students' cultural and personal factors influencing their reactions to interaction opportunities. Students at particular levels of study and from more nations should also be considered. Finally, future researchers can take into account target students in different ages and with various demographic background. Research on student goals and expectations may be investigated at the same time with research involving responses from teachers, administrators, parents, and other local people in the community for comparison purposes.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 Questionnaire

BACKGROUND

Level of study: English course / Undergraduate / Masters' / PhD / Post-doctoral

University:

Major:

Time living in the UK until now: A couple of months/ 6 months/ one year / two years / more than 2 years

Current accommodation: Dormitory / Host Family / Apartment / Others

IELTS speaking score:

Are you willing to attend interview session? If yes, please provide your email address.

Please choose the option that best approximates your position

(1 = *Strongly agree*; 2 = *agree*; 3 = *Neutral*;
4 = *Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly disagree*)

PART A - BEFORE YOU WENT ABROAD:

I wanted to speak English like native speakers.
I thought studying abroad would improve my English speaking significantly.
I thought studying abroad would enrich my cultural knowledge.
I believed I could make friends with non-Vietnamese friends easily.
I thought I would spend a lot of time on social events.
I believed I would develop my communication skills after studying abroad.
I planned to speak English at home and school.
I believed I would become more confident in speaking English after studying abroad.
I thought I would have many interaction opportunities in English in the UK.
One of my reasons to choose studying abroad was to get more informal interaction opportunities in English.

PART B - AFTER ARRIVING

1. Progress in Competence

Now, my cultural knowledge has improved significantly.
My speaking skills have improved significantly.
My listening skills have improved significantly.
My English vocabulary for conversation has improved significantly.
My grammar knowledge has improved significantly.

I am good at small-talk now.

I can now express myself in English easily.

I am satisfied with my progress in English competence so far.

I have now started to think in English.

2. Face-to-Face Informal Interaction Opportunities in English in the UK

Face-to-face informal interaction opportunities in English are important.

I find many opportunities to communicate in English with friends.

I always use English in the university.

I always use English at home here in the UK.

My university provides opportunities to help me engage with the local community.

I participate in social events in the university actively.

I often participate in local events outside the university.

I feel it easier to hang out with people having similar Asian cultural background.

I feel British people are friendly to talk with.

3. Social Interaction

I develop my social relationships with non-Vietnamese friends without problems.

Informal social interactions have helped me improve my English skills.

Generally, I feel satisfied with my social interactions in the UK.

I have many local friends.

I have many international friends.

I have many Vietnamese friends.

I feel engaged with my local community in the UK.

I feel I belong here at the university.

I need help from the university to connect with more people.

4. Any Difficulty

I find it difficult to communicate with British people.

I find it difficult to communicate with international friends.

I do not have spare time to make communication opportunities.

My language ability prevents me from communicating effectively.

I don't feel confident when speaking with strangers.

I am afraid of making mistakes when I communicate in English with other friends.

I do not know what topics I should talk about.

I feel nervous when listeners do not understand me when I speak.

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey!

APPENDIX 2: Interview

PART A: BACKGROUND AND EXPECTATIONS

1. Could you tell me about your educational background and why did you choose to study in the UK? What were your motivations for study abroad?
2. Did your previous knowledge and



English skills you gained in Vietnam help you a lot to communicate? *If yes, how? If no, why?*

3. What were your expectations before you went away?

PART B: EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES

How did you immerse yourself in the local environment?

- ✓ Friends: native or international friends?
- ✓ Participating in local activities?
- ✓ Living conditions: who did you live with?
- ✓ Contacts with the natives? In what forms? Invitations to dinner?
- ✓ Did anyone help you to understand the culture better?

Interaction Opportunities:

4. Please outline or describe your current social circle. Who do you spend most of your time with and what kinds of activities do you do with these people?
5. What are your impressions of Britain and the British people so far?
6. How much time, would you say, do you spend with each of these groups:
People from your own country? British people?
International students?
How important is it to you to form friendships with other international students?
How important is it to you to form friendships with people from your home country?
How important is it to you to form friendships with British people?
7. Do you attend any social clubs, or religious and charity programme?
If so, how do you feel? Does it help improve your skills?
If not, why?
8. Do you have any part-time jobs?
If yes, do you use English in your job? Does it help you with your language ability?
If no, why?
9. How often do you use Vietnamese and English to communicate? (at home and in the university)
Do you speak English in the university?
Do you speak English at home? How often? Weekends? Flatmates?

Outcomes

10. Do you feel that you are using English as much as you expected to, or less, or more?
11. How, would you say, has your English language ability developed over the time you spent in the UK?
12. How satisfied are you with the social support you receive from the people around you? *Who do you turn to for academic support? Who do you turn to for emotional support?*

13. How did this year in the UK compare to the expectations you had pre-arrival?

14. What have you learnt about the local culture? From what sources?

15. To what extent have your perceptions and understanding of other cultures and other people changed?

PART C: ANY DIFFICULTIES

16. What do you think is the biggest challenge/barrier in your English communication?

If so, what difficulties? How do you feel in that situation?

If not, can you tell me your experience or your example?

17. Do you face any difficulties in creating interaction opportunities with British people?

If so, what difficulties? How do you feel in that situation?

If not, can you tell me your experience or example?

18. Did you experience something like cultural shock in interaction?

If yes, can you give me some example? How could you overcome?

PART D: RECOMMENDATIONS

19. Do you think your university can help you to gain more interaction opportunities?

If so, how?

If not, why?

20. What recommendations would you give to future Vietnamese students who will come to the UK?

Is there anything from your side that you would like to add?