

**A mixed methods study of language learning motivation and inter-cultural contact of international students**

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**Background**

Second language learning inherently involves learning not only about the language but also about the culture (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). As the statement of the Modern Language Association (2012) expresses, learning another language “serves as a portal to the literatures, cultures, historical perspectives, and human experiences that constitute the human record”. This is particularly true in study-abroad contexts where language learners directly engage in interaction with members of other cultures and their cultural products. These intercultural encounters, or in other words intercultural contact, also affect one’s identification with a particular cultural group (Kramsch, 1998), and as a result shape how one views oneself and the value of one's own culture in relation to those of other cultural groups (Kinginger, 2008). Therefore, inter-cultural contact influences L2 learners’ disposition towards acquiring the language of other cultural groups and consequently their motivated behaviour, that is, the investment they are willing to make in L2 learning, which constitutes the focus of this paper.

Intercultural contact is particularly important in contexts where international students pursue their university studies in a foreign country, as one of the aims of this type of experience is for learners to interact with the host country members and thus gain a deeper understanding of their culture (see Cohen et al., 2005). Study abroad programmes, of which international study constitutes one type, are often set up and sponsored in the hope that students will engage in contact situations, their intercultural sensitivity and knowledge of and familiarity with the target language culture will

be enhanced, and they will improve their second language competence. Nevertheless, while a lot of research has focused on American students in study-abroad programmes (e.g. Dewey et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2005; Kinginger, 2008; Pellegrinon Aveni, 2005), no previous studies have been carried out that investigated how students' contact experiences, language learning attitudes and motivation change in a UK international study context using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Our study aims to fill this gap; it explores the link between direct and indirect contact with native and non-native speakers of the target language on the one hand, and language learning attitudes and motivated behaviour on the other, in an international study context at a UK university.

Our investigation is partly based on the social psychological study of inter-cultural contact. The most important subfield of the investigation of the contact-attitude relation within social psychology is called the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), in which it is argued that contact changes the attitudes and behaviours of groups and individuals towards one another and, in turn, these changes influence further contact between groups and people. In his seminal work, Allport (1954) posited that certain conditions, such as equal status, common goals, co-operation and institutional support, are necessary for inter-group contact that will lead to favourable changes in the attitudinal disposition of individuals. Based on a comprehensive review of the research into inter-cultural contact conducted in the subsequent forty years, Pettigrew (1998) confirmed that these conditions were indeed necessary for optimal contact. In a more recent meta-analysis of 515 studies of inter-group contact, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) proposed that the key to the contact-attitude relation was the general psychological observation that familiarity leads to an increase in liking (Bornstein, 1989), through reductions in uncertainty and anxiety (Lee, 2001). Therefore, Pettigrew and Tropp hypothesized that the main mediating variable between contact and attitudes is inter-group anxiety. In recent research it was also found that not only might direct contact with members of other cultural groups bring about changes in attitudes, but also

indirect contact and the importance attributed to contact might influence attitudes to the out-group (Van Dick, Wagner, Pettigrew, Christ, Wolf, Petzel, Smith Castro & Jackson, 2004).

The role of inter-cultural contact in promoting attitude change was not only studied in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural settings, but also in study-abroad contexts (see e.g. Kinginger, 2008). The overall findings of research into study-abroad experiences suggest that students tend to have overly positive expectations about the host country members at the beginning of their stay but, during their sojourn, their attitudes become more negative (e.g. Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe & Hewstone, 1996). Study abroad and international study experience can often be stressful and anxiety provoking, due to the initial cultural shock that most students go through when they face differences in values, attitudes and forms of behaviour between their home culture and the new environment (Lewthwaite, 1986). These differences might hinder both acculturation and the processes of socialization in the host country (Jenkins, 2004), which might explain the results of a number of studies that suggest the study-abroad experience might in itself be insufficient to enhance inter-cultural growth and sensitivity (for a review of the field of inter-cultural development see Pedersen, 2010). There is evidence, however, that frequent contact with host-country members is instrumental in bringing about positive attitudinal change and is beneficial to promoting acculturation and socialization (e.g. Cohen et al., 2005; Stangor et al., 1996). Nevertheless, as Kinginger (2008) pointed out, the study of contact “cannot easily be reduced to measures of time-on-task or even of language contact or of social networking” (p. 12), and therefore it is very important to investigate students’ perspectives of intercultural encounters using qualitative methodologies such as diaries and interviews.

As for the field of second language acquisition, contact first appeared in Clément’s (1980) model as a key constituent of motivation. Clément and Kruidenier (1985) showed that frequent and pleasant contact experience resulted in increased linguistic self-confidence in L2 learners which, in turn, affected motivated learning behaviour in a positive way. In another study, Clément, Noels and

Deneault (2001) concluded that more frequent positive contact experiences not only led to more confident language use but also influenced the identification profiles of language learners.

In certain learning environments, however, direct contact with L2 speakers is minimal, yet the L2 community may still be well known to the learners through indirect contact with it, that is, through the learners' exposure to a range of L2 cultural products, such as films, videos, books, magazines and music. In their investigation of various L2 learning orientations, Clément and Kruidenier (1983) isolated a factor that tapped into the 'socialcultural' dimension of L2 motivation, this is "an interest in the way of life and the artistic production of the target language group" (p. 285), which can be seen as indirect contact with the target language community (see Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1994). The presence of this sociocultural dimension characterizes groups living in a multicultural milieu, whereas for groups in a monolingual setting, the factor includes other meanings such as general knowledge about the world and self. Clément et al. (1994) investigated different motivational orientations in a largely monolingual Hungarian context, and they isolated a component called English media that subsumes the consumption of cultural products in English. This study highlights the salient role that L2 cultural products play in familiarizing learners with the L2 community and in influencing their attitudes. Based on their longitudinal study in Hungary, Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh (2006) developed a model of L2 learning motivation in which indirect contact was one of the main variables that predicted motivated learning behaviour.

With regard to the study abroad context, Pellegrino Aveni (2005) investigated the experiences of American students participating in a study-abroad programme in Russia by means of a diary study and interviews. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) found that a large number of her participants had to cope with threats to their ideal L2 self and self-esteem and the resulting anxiety, and this negatively affected the quality and quantity of interactions the participants engaged in in the target language. She concluded that students who were successful in establishing intercultural relationships were those who were able to maintain their social status and control over interaction in the L2. In another study, Cohen et al. (2005) found that students' intercultural sensitivity and

cultural strategy use significantly increased between the onset and end of the study-abroad programme. With regard to the link between motivation, attitudes and interaction in study-abroad programmes for American students, Isabelli-Garcia's (2006) and Hernandez's (2010) research suggested that integrative motivation and positive attitudes had a positive effect on interaction with NS. In her qualitative analysis, Kinginger (2008) gave an account of a complex interaction between American students' identities, perceptions and engagement with the host context in France. Her findings seem to indicate that due to globalization and new means of electronic communication, "immersion is increasingly a matter of choice, and perhaps in some cases a locus of struggle. Language learning in study-abroad settings will require a more profound and durable commitment than has been needed in the past" (p. 105). These results also underscore the importance of investigating the role of motivation and intended language learning effort in study-abroad contexts.

In our longitudinal study, we were interested in how students' contact experiences, language learning attitudes and goals, and self-efficacy beliefs vary at three distinct points in time – at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year – in an international study context. An additional construct that constituted the focus of our study was motivated learning behaviour, an important antecedent of achievement in language learning (Dörnyei, 2005), which is defined as the effort expended to achieve a goal, a desire to learn the language, and satisfaction with the task of learning (Gardner, 1985). In our research we differentiated between direct contact with target language speakers and indirect contact, which involved contact with the L2 through the use of media products. Within direct contact we considered both spoken and written contact, and we enquired about language use with host-country members as well as with other international students. Finally, we also investigated students' perceptions about the importance of contact and the benefits gained from contact experience.

In the qualitative interviews, which we carried out retrospectively at the end of the academic year, we enquired into what kind of positive and negative contact experiences the students had had

and what factors they and their teachers considered important in fostering or hindering interactions with native and non-native users of English. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What characterizes the language learning motivation and the frequency and type of contact experiences of international students participating in a British international study programme?
2. How do motivational variables and contact experiences vary at three distinct points in time over a period of one academic year in a British international study context?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The study was conducted with international students participating in a foundation programme on a university campus in the UK. The aim of the programme, for which the organiser is a member of a chain of schools across the UK, is to prepare students for entry to a British university. The students received 15 hours of English language instruction per week for nine months, and they also took content courses in their selected field of study. The language component of the programme provided instruction in academic skills (English for Academic Purposes) and aimed to develop students' ability to produce and understand written and spoken academic texts. At the end of the academic year, the students took an exam in both English and the relevant subject they intended to study (these mostly included management studies and engineering). The international foundation programme we investigated can be regarded as a typical example of preparatory courses for university entry offered in the UK, both in terms of its curriculum and the characteristics of the student sample.

The participants in the survey were 70 international students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds but with the majority being Chinese (73%). Eight per cent of the students were Arabic L1 speakers, and the others came from countries including Kazakhstan, Vietnam, India, Pakistan,

Russia, Mexico and Ukraine. The participants' level of proficiency was between 4.5 to 7.5 in the IELTS exam, with the most frequent marks being in the 5-6 range. In other words, the level of L2 competence of the students varied from lower intermediate to high upper intermediate. Forty-one per cent of the survey participants were male and 59 per cent female, and their ages ranged between 17 and 24.

The interview participants were ten international students and two of their English language tutors. Four of the students were Hong Kong Chinese and two came from Mainland China. From each of four countries – Vietnam, Pakistan, India and Kazakhstan – there was one participant. Five of the students were male and five female. The interview participants were selected from a pool of volunteers so that they would represent the nationalities participating in this international foundation programme. The interviews were conducted a year after the quantitative data were collected and analysed; therefore the interviewees did not fill in the questionnaires in the previous stage of the research. The number of interview participants was not predetermined and we collected data until we thought we had reached saturation and no new information would emerge.

One of the course tutors interviewed was a male native speaker teacher, whereas the other interviewee was a female non-native teacher. We decided to select both a native and a non-native speaker instructor in order to represent the distribution of the first language background of the tutors in this particular programme. The native speaking teacher had been working in this programme for five years and the female teacher for two years at the time the study was conducted.

### *Instruments*

The questionnaire, which consisted of 59 items, aimed to elicit students' views on contact experience; consequently it assessed four aspects of contact that were identified as relevant constructs based on the review of literature and our previous research (Kormos & Csizér, 2007; Csizér & Kormos, 2009): direct spoken and written contact, media contact and the perceived importance of contact. As explained above, our questionnaire also intended to measure motivated

behaviour, language learning attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs and three language learning goals: instrumental, knowledge and international orientations.

Apart from the seven open-ended items at the end of the questionnaire asking about students' biographical details, all items used a 5-point Likert scale. The items of the questionnaire were adapted from Csizér and Kormos (2009) previous study, which investigated the role of intercultural contact in motivation in a foreign language learning environment; they were slightly revised to suit the international study context. The questions on motivational variables were based on a previous survey instrument by Kormos, Kiddle and Csizér (2011). Finally, the items that aimed to describe self-efficacy beliefs were specifically written for the current study. The questionnaire was written in English, and prior piloting on five students from the sample population using concurrent verbal reports was carried out to ensure that the participants understood the wording of the questions.

The main variable groups in the questionnaire were as follows:

*Direct spoken contact* (5 items): Frequency of direct spoken contact with native and non-native speakers of English.

*Direct written contact* (5 items). Frequency of written contact by means of traditional mail, e-mail and chatting on the Internet.

*Media contact* (5 items) Frequency of contact with the target language by means of watching L2 TV programmes, films, reading magazines, using the Internet.

*Perceived importance of contact* (6 items): Learners' perceptions of the importance of intercultural contact with L2 speakers as a valuable tool for improving their language skills, getting to know the target language culture, and decreasing their language use anxiety.

*Instrumental orientation* (8 items): The utilitarian benefits learners associate with mastery of the language, such as a better education or a better job.

*International orientation* (6 items): Students' attitudes to English as an international language.

*Attitudes towards learning the L2* (5 items): Learners' enjoyment derived from the language

learning process.

*Motivated learning behaviour* (7 items): Students' effort and persistence in learning English.

*Self-efficacy beliefs* (7 items): Learners' belief that they will be able to acquire English successfully for their own purposes.

The interview questions were designed to gain insights into the changes and reasons for them in the aforementioned variables. Accordingly, the interviews with the students covered eight main themes: direct spoken contact, direct written contact, media contact, perceived importance of contact, instrumental orientation, international orientation, attitudes towards language learning and motivated behaviour. In order to aid students' retrospective recall of the changes in these variables, we provided them with a separate chart for the variables that showed the time period divided into months and asked them to draw a line to represent the change. We asked them to explain the completed chart and provide detailed reasons for changes or lack of them.

In order to triangulate data sources, the interview questions posed to the tutors of the participants covered similar themes to those in the interviews. Additionally, we asked the tutors to describe the instructional programme in detail and to give us an overall characterization of the profiles of the students attending the institution.

### *Procedures*

The research site was first contacted to gain permission to conduct the study. After we obtained access, we administered the questionnaire with the help of language instructors during different sessions, such as the orientation meetings before each academic term and as part of the course summary and feedback sessions.<sup>1</sup> Data collection took place on three occasions during the academic year, at approximately equal intervals: immediately after the students joined the programme, in the middle of the year, and at the end of the programme. Answering the questions took the students approximately 15-20 minutes on average. Participation in the research was voluntary.

For the interviews we recruited participants who were willing to share their experiences with us. Both teachers and students were paid for taking part in the interviews, which were conducted by one of the authors of the paper. Both students and teachers were interviewed individually in a quiet room. The student interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and the teacher interviews were 45-60 minutes long.

### *Analyses*

All the questionnaires were computer-coded and SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 18.0 was used to analyze the data. The answers to the questionnaire were first subjected to factor analysis and multidimensional scaling (conducting separate analyses for each data collection occasion). Factor analysis has shown that data can be described with an identical factor solution for the three waves of data collection. Next, based on the outcome of the principal component analysis, the items were divided into several multi-item scales, and Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability coefficients were computed (see Table 1). Based on the Cronbach's alpha values, we could conclude that the questionnaire items provided an adequate measure of the various latent components in this study.

As a next step, descriptive statistics were computed for the latent variables. To establish the effect of time on motivational and contact variables, we conducted repeated measures analyses of variance. For the post-hoc analysis of significant difference between different time periods, we used paired-sample t-tests. The level of significance for this study was set at  $p < .05$  and, where relevant, effect sizes were calculated.

The interview transcripts yielded about 25,000 words of data, which were first analysed independently by two of the authors for emerging themes based on the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the themes found relevant by both researchers were agreed on, definitions of the categories of analysis were developed and

refined based on the analysis of the first three interviews. Two of the authors then coded all the utterances separately, following which certain modifications were made to some of the categories, and the wording of the definitions was fine-tuned. Discrepancies between the analyses of the two authors were discussed until full agreement was reached. In analyzing our data we used the data analysis software MAXQDA 2007.

## **Results and discussion**

### *The characteristics of language learning motivation of students in an international study programme*

Our first research question enquired into the general characteristics of language learning motivation and the contact experiences of students in the international study programme investigated. The questionnaire survey revealed that the three variables that showed the highest mean values were international and instrumental orientation, whereas the mean values for language learning attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs and motivated behaviour were around a value of 4 on a 5-point scale (see Table 1).

*Insert Table 1 around here*

Both the descriptive statistics of motivational variables at different time points and interview data suggest that students who took part in this international study programme had instrumental language learning goals and attributed high importance to the international status of English. Five mentioned goals that could be characterized as instrumental in nature: students mainly expected their international study opportunity to help them to get a better job because of their enhanced English knowledge as well as the fact that they had participated in an international study

programme. Concerning international orientation, six participants mentioned the fact that English was a global language, and therefore it was a language everyone should learn. Interestingly, despite the fact that in most previous studies instrumental orientation was treated separately from international orientation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 2006), for our participants these two language learning orientations often overlapped, which might be due to the status of English as a lingua franca: As one of the interview participants put it, “I think in the future Chinese people still need to speak English in their jobs or they need to speak with other countries' people so I think it's [a] very important skill for us.”<sup>2</sup>

The quantitative data indicate that students not only have strong goals towards language learning but also hold favourable self-efficacy beliefs, which suggests that they believe in their ability to achieve the level of proficiency needed for their university studies. This was only partly supported by the interview data, which revealed that only six out of the ten participants were confident they would achieve the desired level of language competence. The interview data also reveal that lack of favourable self-efficacy beliefs is also related to students' infrequent contact with native and international speakers of English and to the high levels of anxiety experienced when interacting with speakers from outside the student's own L1 group. As one of the interviewees described it, “I am not confident I can improve my English because I am very afraid to talk to other people.”

Although in the questionnaire survey the students' language learning attitudes were found to be mainly positive, the mean values for the motivated behaviour scale were somewhat lower. The students' own reports in the interviews also suggest that most of the effort they invest in language learning is in relation to exams and improving their marks. For example, one of the students admitted that, “I did not do much work on English, but after I knew the grade of my first term and I knew that I need to practise my English, I do some more work.”

In sum, the international students participating in the study can be characterized as having strong language learning goals, which are instrumental and related to the international status of the

English language. The dominance of these instrumental goals, however, does not seem to lead to high levels of effort in language learning as revealed by the questionnaire data. As one of the tutors described it, “They’ve got the school attitude, as long as I go along with what you tell me to do, I’ll be fine ... so it’s independent study that a lot of them don’t do.” One of the explanations for the findings might be the potentially different cultural notions of responsibility for learning (for a recent critical review of this issue see Gan, 2009). Another possible cause for the apparent low level of motivated behaviour might be related to the argument originally made by Kinginger (2008) for American students in France, which seems to hold true for international students from other language backgrounds in the UK. In this modern age of technology, most of our interview participants gave detailed accounts of how new means of communication and entertainment allowed them to stay connected with their home and social networks, which seems to have reduced the effort they put into making the most of their international study year in terms of language learning.

#### *The characteristics of the contact experiences of students in an international study programme*

The questionnaire data reveal that participants in the study held positive views about the importance of contact with host-country members and other speakers of English. In terms of the possible benefits concerning contact experiences, contact with native speakers was viewed as important because it is through interaction that new knowledge about the language can be gained, whereas contact experience with international speakers was mainly valued for the opportunity to learn about other cultures.

Nonetheless, the questionnaire results reveal that the mean values of direct, indirect and media contact variables are only slightly above the middle point of the scale, and the majority of the interviewees gave accounts of infrequent contact experiences. Both the survey and qualitative interview data suggest that contact with native speakers was infrequent for most students.

Exceptions were the Indian and Pakistani participants who had both succeeded in establishing a social network consisting of native speakers. It is to be noted, however, that in the case of the Indian participant, many of his friends were Indians born in Britain.

One of the reasons why students in this study-abroad context did not initiate contact with host country members could be the lack of the basic conditions necessary for successful contact, as proposed in previous studies: equal status, common goals, co-operation and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The interview participants often mentioned that due to their lack of sufficiently high communicative ability, they often felt neglected and disregarded by native speakers. One of the students told us how she felt left out in conversations among native speakers: “Although I can pick up some keywords of their conversation, I want to participate but they already switch and change to the next topic.” She also gave an account of another incident: “Yeah, salesperson. I would like this thing but I can’t describe it and I can’t get communication with her. The salesperson face turn cold and she doesn’t want to talk to me.” The interviewed teachers also informed us that the participants in the study did not have any opportunities for co-operation with native speaker students, other than simple everyday errands. Although institutional support on the part of the study centre was provided in the form of extracurricular activities, these efforts were apparently not sufficient to help learners engage in frequent contact with native speakers, and did not establish the necessary conditions for successful contact opportunities.

The interview data reveal some additional important reasons for the lack of direct contact observed. Six out of the ten interviewees felt that they did not have a sufficient level of English language competence to communicate with native speakers, especially with native speaker flatmates in their university accommodation. They perceived that low levels of speaking and listening skills induced high levels of communication anxiety and apprehension (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) in the students. The quote by one of the participants illustrates how students’ fear of making mistakes, not being understood or not understanding their

interlocutors can prevent them initiating interaction with native speakers. “When I came here, I faced a real problem, the problem that sometimes it’s hard to start talking because you start thinking what if I say something wrong. What if these people will laugh at me, what if they think I don’t know anything. They won’t be willing to talk to me again.” While this student had eventually successfully overcome her initial anxiety, for many of the students, especially the Chinese participants, negative communicative experiences reinforced their communication apprehension. Three of the participants told us that they were laughed at because of their language mistakes, which they perceived as a serious threat to their face. Communication breakdowns also had long-lasting effects on native speaker contact. For example, one of the interviewees reported, “My flatmate. This happened once. He knocked on my door and I can’t understand what he said. Then after the night he seldom talk to me.” The data in our study reinforce Pellegrino Aveni’s (2005) conclusion that “interlocutors’ behaviours that explicitly or implicitly convey negative attitudes toward learners [...] may also cause learners to feel that their efforts to communicate are invalid, and that they are disregarded as respected, accepted human beings among the members of the L2 society” (p. 71).

Students reported slightly more frequent contact with other international students on campus in the interviews, but except for the participants who did not have a considerable number of fellow students from the same native language or ethnic background, these contact occasions remained limited. Nevertheless, most of the participants admitted that they felt less anxious when speaking with international fellow students and no negative experiences similar to those incidents with native speakers were mentioned. The participants themselves explained the low level of contact with other international students by the fact that they could communicate in their own mother tongue due to the number of students present (Chinese) or by the sense of security felt when being in their own ethnic group at times of cultural adjustment (“Then in November, I got to know lots of people from my country so ... I was missing home like homesick so I spent more time with them”). As also argued by Pellegrino Aveni (2005), the use of the L1 and interactions with one’s own ethnic group

in a foreign environment help students protect their identity and self-esteem. Therefore, the importance of ties with the students' own L1 group should not be underestimated (see Gu (2011) for a similar argument).

Interestingly, in cases when students do not have an L1 group to rely on for emotional support, they might seek contact with members of cultures that they perceive to be similar to their own. As our Vietnamese participant noted about Chinese students, "They are in the same situation as me. I think most Asian people are quite shy. This might be suitable with me so I can speak with them more freely than when I speak with native speakers." The Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong also reported that they most often socialized with Mandarin speakers, and one of them even noted that her language competence in Mandarin improved significantly more than her ability to speak English.

The quantitative data also show differences in the direct contact experiences between participants from different linguistic backgrounds. The independent sample t-tests that were carried out to find differences in the frequency of direct contact between students from mainland China and Hong Kong and students from elsewhere revealed that Chinese students engaged in direct spoken contact significantly less frequently than non-Chinese students at Time 1 ( $t = 3.36$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and Time 2 ( $t = 3.43$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) but not at Time 3 ( $t = 1.61$ ,  $p = 0.10$ ). These findings can be explained with reference to Schumann's (1986) Acculturation Hypothesis, which predicts that if the size of the L2 speaking community is large and the group is cohesive, then members of the L2 group will be less inclined to use the target language with host country members.

Similar to direct spoken contact, indirect contact through different media (TV, radio, Internet, magazines and books) did not seem to be frequent among the participants either. Most students watched various TV shows in English, but mainly for entertainment and not as a conscious way to improve their language competence. Students also reported very few reading activities apart from what they had to read for academic purposes and, as the questionnaire data reveal, they mostly read

electronic texts on the Internet. The interviewees rarely used social networking sites in the medium of English and did not write emails in English frequently either.

To summarize, the qualitative and quantitative data with regard to direct spoken contact underscore the important effect of inter-group anxiety (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and communication apprehension on students' willingness to engage in interaction (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 1998). The findings indicate that as a result of high communication apprehension and perceived threats to self-esteem, the international students investigated mainly socialized within their own group. Nevertheless, as argued by Gu (2011), friendships between students from the same language and ethnic background should not be discouraged, but rather supported, as they help international "students' social and cultural adjustment in the host society" (p. 226).

#### *Variations in motivational and contact variables during one academic year*

To answer our second research question we investigated how motivational and contact variables vary in the course of one academic year in an international foundation programme. As for changes over time, we observed a significant decrease in all the variables except for direct written contact, which was found to increase between the onset of the programme (Time 1) and the middle of the academic year (Time 2). The results shown in Table 1 reveal that a significant decline in the mean values of contact and motivational variables occurred between Time 2 and the end of the program (Time 3) and, with the exceptions of self-efficacy beliefs and direct spoken contact, also between Time 1 and Time 3. The eta square values suggest that the effect of time on motivational and contact variables was large, except for self-efficacy beliefs and direct spoken contact, for which the effect size measures were only in the medium range.

If we consider the changes in the motivational and contact variables in our questionnaire data (see Table 1), we can observe that with the exception of direct written and media contact, no major

changes took place in the first half of the programme between Time 1 and Time 2. This suggests that, initially, students' motivation and attitudes remained stable, and that they continued to attribute high importance to contact opportunities. Nevertheless, students had not succeeded in enhancing their spoken contact experiences, even four months after their arrival in the country. The explanation for this lack of change in the frequency of direct contact can be manifold. On the one hand, many students reported high levels of communication anxiety, which prevented them from engaging in contact with native speakers. The negative experiences of interactions with native speakers, some of which were described above, led students to avoid contact and drew them even more strongly into their first language group where they could feel their self-esteem was protected. Two of the participants described how they shared an initial experience of culture shock and feelings of being away from home with their own cultural group, and how this helped their cultural adjustment. In one of the participant's words, "Then in November, I got to know lots of people from my country ... so I was missing home like homesick so I spent more time with them. Then I got adjusted to it and so I still kept in contact with my flatmates but now I've got friends from Pakistan, from India." Unfortunately, as shown above, this case was not typical, and many of the Chinese students did not establish stronger friendships and contact with students from outside their groups; in other words they adopted an avoidance strategy to communicating with native speakers (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). Experiences where students felt that they were esteemed and valued members of the host community were rare. The case described by the following quote was exceptional in this regard: "because these two English students live next to me so day one, they gave me a positive response towards me. They started to interact with me properly, they respected me as a foreigner, they helped me out, so like they've made me feel comfortable around them." This participant's adjustment process illustrates that the positive socio-environmental clues that students receive in an international study environment can enhance their self-esteem and help socialization in this new context (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

The interview data also illustrate the importance of considering not only stable traits of individual differences in study-abroad research but also the role of events (see MacIntyre and Legatto (2011) for similar arguments concerning the study of willingness to communicate). Nearly all of our participants described significant events involving interactions with native speakers in the target language that had changed their attitude and willingness to seek out further contact opportunities. In the majority of cases the events happened in the initial stages of students' socialisation in the international study environment and at a point where learners' intercultural attitude and self-perceptions were vulnerable. In seven cases, the events had a detrimental effect on students' self-esteem and led them to avoid contact and stay with their own L1 group. It was only for three participants that their experiences meant that they felt welcome and accepted in the community of either native speaking students or the group of other international students. From the students' accounts it is also apparent that most of the events that had a negative effect on the international students could have been avoided if the interlocutors had been more understanding of the communication difficulties arising in the interaction and had tried to support the comprehension processes of the students instead of opting out of the conversation.

Unlike direct spoken contact, the frequency of direct written and media contact increased between Time 1 and Time 2, which can be explained with reference to the instructional tasks in the course. As explained by the teacher interviewees, in the second term of the programme, which started a month before the questionnaire was administered at Time 2, students were required to keep a reflective diary of the media programmes they watched and the magazine articles they read. Students were also encouraged to communicate with each other and with their course tutors by e-mail, which might also have contributed to the augmented frequency of direct contact. This suggests that, in an international study context, instructional tasks and institutional support play a very important role in encouraging students to engage in written and media contact in the target language.

The results indicate a considerable drop in the frequency of contact by the end of the academic year. The explanation for this finding might also lie in the instructional context. At the end of an international study programme students need to take exams in both English and content area subjects. Both the student and teacher interviewees told us that the last period of the academic year is generally devoted to studying for these exams and that students have fewer opportunities and less time to engage in contact with each other and with target language speakers. This might explain why, at the end of the academic year, the frequency of direct spoken contact decreased even further for non-Chinese students, who engaged in more frequent interaction with other speakers at earlier points in the study.

The mean values for the motivational variables were also found to decrease at Time 3 of the study. The reason for this might be that the students considered their official language learning period to be finished and realized that from then on language would cease to be the object of study but would become more of a tool to acquire content and knowledge in their academic discipline. As explained by the teacher interviewees, another reason for the drop in motivational variables might be that in this period the participants focus on their content area exams and pay considerably less attention to the development of their language skills.

## **Conclusion and implications**

The study reported in this paper explored direct and indirect cross-cultural contact, language learning attitudes and motivated behaviour in an international study context in the UK, which has previously received little attention in the study-abroad literature. Our research, which combined quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, also aimed to shed light on longitudinal variations in motivational and contact variables during a nine-month long international foundation programme that provides language instruction for international students wishing to pursue university studies in the UK. The results indicate that whereas written and media contact increased

in frequency during the academic year, the participants engaged in less frequent spoken contact at the end of the period investigated. A decrease in students' motivated behaviour, language learning attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs could also be observed during the academic year.

The interviews and questionnaire study suggest that three main group of factors might be influential in determining the amount and type of contact students experience in an international study environment. Firstly, socio-environmental factors such as the size of the students' L1 speaking community in the host country, the socio-environmental clues the students receive from target language speakers and the conflict between the students' own attitudes, cultural beliefs and experiences and those of the host country have an important effect on how frequently students initiate contact with L2 speakers. As the interviews reveal, institutional support is instrumental in encouraging students to use cultural and media products, and thereby to engage in indirect contact with the target language. Second, learner internal variables, such as motivated behaviour, language learning attitudes, self-confidence, self-efficacy beliefs, self-esteem, self-perceptions and communication apprehension, can potentially also determine the quality and frequency of contact. Finally, it is important to highlight the role of significant events in explaining how students interact with host country members in international study contexts. The dimensions of the participants' "experiential history" (Rosenzweig, 1986, p. 242) complement and dynamically interact with the stable traits of the learners and the social and institutional context.

Our study has several implications for international study programmes. Firstly, it underscores the importance of preparing students for their international study experience before they arrive in the host country, both in terms of developing their linguistic ability and their intercultural communication skills and strategies (for examples see Cohen et al., 2005; Kinginger, 2009). After arrival, institutional support to assist students to adjust to the new cultural environment and handle possibly negative social clues is also a necessary precondition for students to benefit from studying abroad and to establish contact with target language speakers. Only in this way can successful learning, mediated through the target language and the host's and the learners' own culture, take

place. It is, however, unrealistic to expect that only foreign students should make an effort to adjust to the new environment. As our data illustrate, international students' self-esteem and self-confidence can suffer considerably from negative contact experiences that could have been avoided if the hosts, in this case often the students' native speaker flatmates, had been better prepared for interacting with L2 speakers. Therefore, as Pellegrino Aveni (2005) also suggests, institutional support that helps hosts to understand the feelings, attitudes and forms of behaviour of international students is also needed. This would help diminish inter-group anxiety and provide contact opportunities for L2 speakers, even in cases where there is a sizeable L1 group they can rely on for emotional support in the new environment.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> At the university where this research was conducted an academic year consists of three ten-week-long terms. In the international study programme investigated, students have the opportunity to discuss any issues related to the course and the programme during a course summary and feedback session at the end of each term.

<sup>2</sup> The interviewees' utterances are quoted verbatim.

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Table 1. The reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics concerning the results of the three waves of data collection

	Cr. $\alpha$ Time 1 Time 2 Time 3	Time 1 Mean (SD)	Time 2 Mean (SD)	Time 3 Mean (SD)	F ( $\eta^2$ )	Differences
Motivational scales						
Self-efficacy belief	.89 .88 .85	4.00 (.67)	4.04 (.62)	3.90 (.63)	3.55* (.10)	T2-T3
Language learning attitudes	.85 .76 .82	3.99 (.69)	3.92 (.65)	3.68 (.70)	8.08** (.19)	T1-T3 T2-T3
International orientation	.68 .72 .78	4.34 (.55)	4.29 (.52)	4.10 (.56)	5.36** (.14)	T1-T3 T2-T3
Instrumental orientation	.76 .83 .74	4.15 (.46)	4.20 (.49)	3.98 (.44)	10.27** (.23)	T1-T3 T2-T3
Motivated learning behavior	.66 .75 .70	3.80 (.52)	3.82 (.58)	3.43 (.66)	20.31** (.37)	T1-T3 T2-T3
Contact scales						
Direct spoken contact	.77 .79 .79	3.66 (.72)	3.65 (.61)	3.48 (.69)	4.05* (.11)	T2-T3
Direct written contact	.71 .73 .77	3.12 (.96)	3.44 (.79)	3.40 (.81)	5.37** (.18)	T1-T2
Media contact	.81 .78 .75	3.30 (.73)	3.63 (.63)	3.45 (.66)	15.19** (.31)	T1-T2 T2-T3
Perceived importance of contact	.70 .77 .80	4.15 (.48)	4.10 (.52)	3.92 (.59)	6.13** (.15)	T1-T3 T2-T3

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$