

## Learning Chinese through Contextualized Language Practices in Study Abroad Residence Halls: Two Case Studies

CELESTE KINGINGER  
*Pennsylvania State University*  
[cxk37@psu.edu](mailto:cxk37@psu.edu)

QIAN WU  
*Ryerson University*  
[qianwu@ryerson.ca](mailto:qianwu@ryerson.ca)

### ABSTRACT

A key question about study abroad concerns the relative benefits and qualities of various living arrangements as sites for learning language and culture. A widely shared assumption seems to be that students choosing homestays enjoy more opportunities for engagement in high-quality interactive settings than do those who opt for residence halls. However, research on outcomes has to date produced only weak evidence for a homestay advantage, suggesting a need to understand the nature of language socialization practices in various living situations. While a number of studies have examined the nature of homestay interaction, only a few have focused on language use in residence halls or other settings where students may interact with peers who are expert second language users. Informed by a Vygotskian approach to the study of development, this article examines the specific qualities of contextualized language practices through two case studies of U.S.-based learners of Mandarin in Shanghai and their Chinese roommates. In the first case, a friendly relationship emerged from routine participation in emotionally charged conversational narrative. In the second, both participants' interest in verbal play and humor led to enjoyment as well as profoundly intercultural dialogue. In each case, there is evidence to show that all parties enjoyed opportunities to learn. These findings suggest that residence halls can be very significant contexts for learning in study abroad settings.

### INTRODUCTION

A key decision facing prospective language learners abroad is their choice of living arrangements, that is, homestays, residence halls, or other accommodations. A common assumption in promotional materials for specific programs and in research to date appears to be that homestays are superior to other living arrangements in providing exposure to local realities, including not only language but also cultural norms, practices, values, and worldviews. This assumption is likely grounded in the notion that living in the home of a local family will in some ways reproduce the process of language socialization in childhood. However, research examining outcomes has struggled to demonstrate a homestay advantage for language learning. Consequently, some qualitative research has explored unscripted, naturally

occurring interactions in homestay settings, revealing great variability both in the nature of these interactions and in the extent to which all parties are positively disposed toward them, and thereby helping to elucidate the findings of larger-scale or comparative studies measuring outcomes. In the meantime, only a few researchers have taken up the study of contextualized language practices in other settings, such as residence halls. We know very little about the qualities, for language learning, of interaction with peers. If we wish to make meaningful comparisons between residence options, we should gain further understanding of these contexts.

#### THE CURRENT STUDY

In this article we explore the qualities of interaction for language and culture learning in residence halls through two detailed case studies of American learners of Chinese and their local roommates. The first involves an African American woman, Puppies, and her Taiwanese roommate, Kiki, who developed a warm relationship, providing each other many occasions for learning through the practice of emotionally charged conversational narrative. The second examines the experience of David Wang (King David), a Jewish American man whose advanced proficiency in Chinese allowed him to engage in situational humor, language play, and discussion of abstract cultural topics with his roommate, Shawn, a student of classical Chinese literature. (All names are pseudonyms and were chosen by the participants). Although each case is decidedly unique, all parties evaluated their experience as highly worthwhile. These cases suggest that residence halls are not inherently less valuable as contexts for language learning than homestays: They are merely different in ways that reflect some general contrasts between interaction with peers and interaction with individuals in family-like positions of authority. Thus, when comparative studies fail to demonstrate a homestay advantage for language learning, these findings might reflect not only difficulties in homestays but also the potential richness of other interactive settings, such as residence halls.

#### *Language Development and Living Arrangements in Study Abroad Settings*

The literature addressing questions about language learning and living arrangements in study abroad includes studies of three main types: (a) research on holistic measurable outcomes, usually proficiency, in which accommodation choice normally represents one among other variables; (b) general qualitative or ethnographic studies typically focusing on student perceptions; and (c) microethnographic research involving the collection and analysis of naturally occurring interactive data.

As noted above, whether larger or smaller in scale, quantitative and outcomes-oriented studies have attempted with only minor success to correlate living arrangements with language development. One of earliest and most robust of these studies is Rivers's (1998) examination of homestay versus residence hall occupancy as a predictor of gain in oral proficiency as measured by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). After

examining the scores of more than 2,500 American learners of Russian, Rivers concluded that dormitory residents outperformed students living in local homes, hypothesizing that this finding may be attributed to the banal nature of “quotidian dialogue and television watching” in Russian homestays (1998, p. 496). Magnan and Back (2007) examined gains on the ACTFL OPI in relation to living situations for a group of American learners of French and found no links between choice of residence arrangement and documented language development. In a study that recruited more than 800 students of various languages, Van de Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) found no correlation between housing choice and proficiency gain or intercultural development, although students who reported active engagement with host families tended to display progress in these domains. Finally, while Di Silvio, Donovan, and Malone (2014) were not able to establish a direct correlation between homestay life and gains on the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI), the perception of “a happy homestay” (p. 180) did predict success.

Inspired in part by the modest findings of quantitative studies, researchers taking up qualitative or mixed methods approaches have demonstrated great variation in the nature of homestay experiences. Wilkinson (1998), for example, presented a classic study comparing the sojourns of two American learners of French in a summer intensive program. Ashley lived with a host family who expressed little interest in her or in her language learning, and she made little effort to contribute at home. (All study participants’ names in the cited works are pseudonyms that were used in the studies.) Molise was warmly welcomed into a family who expressly included her in their everyday activities, and she volunteered to care for their children and help in the garden. By the end of the sojourn, Ashley had decided to abandon her study of French, whereas Molise intended to refocus her studies and pursue higher proficiency in that language. A range of homestay experiences was also documented in Kinginger’s case studies (2008) of Americans in France. These included Bill, who enjoyed lengthy dinners at home with hosts both attentive and sensitive to his language learning needs; Ailis, whose single, working host mother preferred to dine each evening in the company of the television; and Beatrice, whose defensive posture eventually led to near complete estrangement from her hosts. Iino (2006) characterized the Japanese host families participating in his study as occupying a continuum from “cultural dependency,” in which student guests were construed as requiring massive (and sometimes unwelcome) assistance to survive, to “two-way enrichment,” in which the sojourn was understood as a learning opportunity for all parties.

Studies closely examining unscripted, naturally occurring interaction also suggest that homestays are hardly uniform in terms of advantages for language learning. Wilkinson (2002), on American learners of French, and Pryde (2014), on Japanese learners of English, both found that homestay talk involving students with intermediate proficiency bore a strong resemblance to classroom discourse. In Pryde’s study, throughout the sojourn, dinner table conversations tended to involve teacher-like control of the floor by host parents and regular use of infantilizing display questions such as “What are we having for dinner today?” (Pryde, unpublished data, personal communication). Kinginger, Wu, Lee, and Tan (2016) compared the

cases of three American high school students of varying proficiency and their host families in Beijing. A student with only beginning level proficiency, David, was hosted by a family highly adept at using physical artefacts and simplified registers to include their guest in Chinese-mediated activities, especially situational humor and teasing. Sam's advanced proficiency made it possible for him to engage in conversations on a broad range of topics. For Henry, however, the homestay was less successful, both because his hosts were unskilled at adjusting their language use to his needs and because he tended to withdraw from family activities.

There exist few studies of naturally occurring interaction with peers and, to our knowledge, only one with an explicit focus on conversation with roommates (Diao, 2014). Shively (2016) adopted an activity theoretical framework to compare the motives of a learner of Spanish, Jared, for participating in talk with his host mother (Carmen) versus an age-peer friend (Luis). Initially, Jared claimed the same four objectives—language learning, communication, relationship building, and enjoyment—for interaction with both. However, over time, his host mother's error corrections and judgmental comments led him to prioritize grammatical accuracy with her, whereas conversations with Luis retained their orientation toward communication and enjoyment: Jared named this friendship as the most important factor in helping him to learn Spanish. Diao (2014) analyzed the process of peer socialization into gendered norms for the use of affective sentence-final particles (ASPs) among three learners and their roommates in Shanghai. Ellen was counseled by her Chinese roommate, Helen, to use these particles as a way of indexing a cute, feminine persona. Tuzi had previously studied in southern China where ASPs are used by both genders. His roommate, Li, critiqued this usage as being "like a girl." Ellen's use of ASPs increased over time, while Tuzi's dropped. A third participant, Mac, used no particles and conversed with his roommate in English primarily. Thus, interaction with peers may be a significant context for language socialization with characteristics potentially different from those of homestays.

The field's emphasis on comparing living arrangements has recently been challenged by some results of the LANGSNAP (Language and Social Networks Abroad) study (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017). The LANGSNAP project followed 57 British undergraduate language majors for 21 months, including a mandatory year in France, Spain, or Mexico, and attempted to link second language (L2) development to the social experience of the sojourn. Case studies of the "high gainers" in the cohort revealed the importance, for social networking, of certain characteristics: "a clear vision of the ideal multilingual self, flexibility and resilience, [and] emotional engagement" involving "intensive L2 relationships which challenge existing L2 proficiency and drive forward development" (Mitchell et al., 2017, pp. 247–248). Of course, no particular context was predictive of emotional engagement, which could involve people of all ages and arise from homestays, apartment sharing, workplaces, recreational affinity groups, and other settings. In this article, we present two cases that illustrate in some detail the value of friendly relationships with local roommates.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Our understanding of contextualized language practices as sites for learning is informed by the Vygotskian sociocultural theory of the process and development of cognition in which language and other semiotic tools are prioritized. This theory posits a dialectical unity of the biological and the social; while reliant upon a biological substrate, the higher mental functions are social and historical in origin. Human action, including thinking and speaking, are mediated by culturally derived psychological tools (Kozulin, 1998), particularly semiosis, for example, language, discourse, schemata, or narrative tools (Wertsch, 2002).

In this theory, learning is conceptualized as a gradual process of internalization taking place through engagement with other human beings and artefacts and generating repertoires for thinking and speaking provided by, and dependent upon, particular historically generated environments (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Communicative interaction is both a means and a result of internalization, which means that language learning is intrinsically inseparable from language use (Van Compernelle, 2015). More significantly, “development does not depend solely on internal mechanisms but on the *quality* and quantity of social interaction that is attuned to the learner’s potential ability” (Lantolf, 2012, p. 57). Therefore, rather than attempting to assess input, time-on-task, or other quantitative variables, here we explore the evolving qualities of interactions in which language learners and age-peer roommates are engaged. We are particularly interested in the extent to which these interactions are or become attuned to the needs of any individuals in the role of *learner*, that is, the participants’ ability to collaboratively establish zones of proximal development (ZPDs), famously defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance of *in collaboration with more capable peers*” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86, italics added).

An additional influence is Vygotsky’s genetic method, inspired by his view of development as a dynamic, historical process. Following Engels’s (1883/1940) *The Dialectics of Nature*, Vygotsky believed that nature plays a role in human development, but that this development also influences nature, generating new developmental conditions. To pursue this dialectical approach, Vygotsky argued for a process ontology to observe the genesis, or history, of development at four interconnected levels: phylogenesis (development of the species), sociocultural history (evolution of human cultures), ontogenesis (life history of individuals), and microgenesis (history of particular psychological functions over short periods of time). Especially relevant for our study are ontogenesis, in terms of the influence of experiences abroad on participants’ lives, and the microgenetic study of particular processes unfolding “right before one’s eyes” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 61). According to Wertsch (1985), who is credited with introducing the term, a microgenetic analysis is “a very short-term longitudinal study” (p. 55).

TABLE 1. *Estimated Proficiency and Amount of Recorded Interactions*

Participant	Estimated Proficiency on the ACTFL scale	Number of audio-recorded interactions	Total time
Puppies	Intermediate Mid	19	448 minutes
David	Advanced Low	14	731 minutes

### *Setting*

Puppies and David were among 25 research participants enrolled at an American study abroad center housed at a university in Shanghai in fall 2015. Exclusively for U.S.-based students, the study abroad center enrolls students who typically study abroad in Shanghai for a semester or two and who transfer their credits back to their home institutions. Its curriculum features intensive and nonintensive Chinese language, as well as elective courses on various subjects. The intensive language track includes 16 hours of Chinese instruction and extra assistance from a one-on-one instructor and a language tutor each week. The nonintensive track incorporates 8 hours of Chinese instruction and weekly meetings with a tutor. The center also organizes extracurricular activities and trips to enrich students' experiences in Shanghai and beyond.

Three housing options were available: homestay with a local family, campus residence hall with a Chinese roommate, or campus residence hall with a cohort roommate. Although local students lived on campus in student dormitories, the U.S.-based students in our study were assigned living space in one of the international student residence halls that were better equipped and more spacious than the lodgings of the locals. The right wing of the building was reserved for the American study abroad program, while the rest of the building was inhabited by international students from all over the world enrolled in degree or nondegree programs at the university. All Chinese roommates were students from the university who had been selected in a competitive process and had gone through training as roommates in the study abroad program. The residence hall was located near one of the canteens and dormitories for local students.

### *Data*

Collected in fall 2015, data include transcriptions of everyday interaction in the residence hall audio-recorded by the students, transcriptions of semistructured interviews with the students and roommates, and field notes from onsite observation. The students were equipped with digital audio recorders and asked to make weekly recordings of spontaneous interaction in the residence hall. Interviews took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Pennsylvania State University, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. [Table 1](#) summarizes estimated proficiency of each student and the number of audio-recorded interactions collected.

### *Participants*

Guided by criterion sampling (Duff, 2008), focal participants were selected based on housing types, language proficiency, racial and ethnic backgrounds, the variety of experience represented, and the willingness of their roommates to participate.

Puppies was a 20-year-old junior majoring in international relations at an American private university. The daughter of an African American father and a Jamaican mother, she grew up in suburban Philadelphia. Although her family language is mainly English, her mother and relatives also spoke Jamaican Creole at home. Puppies's experience with Creole greatly facilitated her language learning: "I think having a parent speaking a dialect that's so strong ... and having relatives that speak that, I think that's probably what helped me pick up language so easily." Before Chinese, Puppies studied Spanish and became very fluent, but was bored by European languages' shared alphabetic systems. When Chinese was first offered in her high school, she made the shift with alacrity. Before the sojourn, she had studied Chinese for four years: two in high school and two in university. Another language in Puppies's repertoire was Korean. As a fan of a Korean boy band, she was well versed in Korean pop culture and knew some Korean words. Studying abroad for the first time, she chose the intensive language track and housing with a Chinese roommate. Through a placement test at the study abroad program, she was placed in a third-year Chinese class that covered materials equivalent to a fifth- and sixth-semester Chinese at-home curriculum.

Puppies's roommate, Kiki, was a 20-year-old junior in software design at the university. Originally from Taipei, 10 years prior to the study, her family had moved to a province adjacent to Shanghai with her father's company. Living with an American roommate for the second time, Kiki was motivated by the opportunity to learn English and American culture, make American friends, and eventually "blend in" with Americans.

David Wang (hereinafter David) was 22 years old and a senior at an American private university majoring in Chinese and minoring in business administration. David grew up in New York State and was the son of a Jewish father and a Christian mother. David had studied Spanish for 6 years and French for 2 years, and he started learning Chinese as a freshman at a public university in New York State before transferring to the private university. In total, he had studied Chinese for 4 years, including a semester abroad in Beijing in 2012. Motivated by China's booming economy and Americans' lack of understanding of Chinese, David aspired to "speak Chinese like a Chinese" and "get into the head of Chinese people." In Shanghai, he opted for the nonintensive language track and was placed in fourth-year Chinese II, equivalent to seventh-semester Chinese at home, and he also chose to live with a Chinese roommate.

David's roommate, Shawn, was a 25-year-old master's degree student in classical Chinese literature at the university. Shawn had prior experience studying abroad and living with an American. He was a visiting scholar at a Canadian university and had lived with a Chinese American from David's study abroad program in the same designated residence hall.

### *Analysis*

This study examines the quality of interaction between the sojourners and their Chinese roommates in the residence hall, aiming to understand this experience in light of participants' personal histories and experience in and outside the dormitory. Data analysis follows the genetic method in tracing the history of language learning and experience, as gleaned from recordings of interactions, interviews, and field notes. We also adopted a microgenetic approach to investigate the interactional data regarding what semiotic mediational means were made available in contextualized language practices and to what extent these interactions involved ZPDs. Interactive data were transcribed using the conventions in DuBois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming, and Paolino (1993; see Appendix A in this article). In this article, we address the following research questions for each case:

1. In what contextualized language practices did the sojourners and their roommates regularly participate?
2. How was language learning made possible in everyday contextualized practices in the residence hall?
3. How did the sojourners' and roommates' personal histories and self- and other-positioning mediate their language learning and overall experience?

### FINDINGS

Both Puppies and David enjoyed a productive semester interacting with their Chinese roommates. Puppies's and Kiki's co-telling of stories and David's and Shawn's language play were significant sites for contextualized language learning, problem solving, style and identity construction, and relationship building. Meanwhile, we found that their participation in the practices and process of language learning were mediated by their quality of relationship, as well as the sojourners' racial and ethnic identities as self- and other-positioned in and outside the dormitory.

#### *Puppies and her Roommate, Kiki*

Puppies considered her time in the residence hall with Kiki to be the highlight of her sojourn and attributed much of her linguistic gain to interaction with Kiki, averaging an hour a day. Topics of their talk included, but were not limited to, daily classes and life, current events in the United States, cultural issues that confounded Kiki after watching American TV, and Korean pop culture. Their interaction typically included conversational narrative or storytelling ubiquitous in everyday talk (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Conversational narrative is a major means through which children or novices are socialized into cultural beings (Miller, Koven, & Lin, 2011). Through emotion-driven sharing of life events and asserting moral orders, interlocutors collaboratively "[build] common ways of acting, thinking, feeling and otherwise being in the world" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 8). It is also through this activity that people establish and maintain social relationships. We present two



excerpts illustrating co-telling of conversational narratives to demonstrate how this participation facilitated contextualized language learning, and how the quality of their relationship and approach to race further mediated Puppies's experience and learning.

Excerpt 1 demonstrates Kiki's interest in learning about American culture and English. She had long been puzzled by media representations, for example, how quickly dating can turn into a sexual relationship on American TV.

Excerpt 1

- |    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 1  | Kiki    | <b>dànshì zhōngguó de diànyǐng</b><br>but Chinese movies   |
| 2  |         | <b>rúguǒ shì guānyú àiqíng de</b><br>if it's about love  |
| 3  | Puppies | <b>èn</b><br>unh   |
| 4  | Kiki    | <b>tāmén huì xiān qiānshǒu</b><br>they would hold hands first  |
| 5  | Puppies | <b>ò</b><br>oh!  |
| 6  | Kiki    | <b>tāmén tāmén nánshēng nǚshēng huì xiān qiānshǒu</b><br>they they boy and girl would hold hands first |
| 7  | Puppies | <b>uhuh</b>  |
| 8  | Kiki    | <b>tāmén huì hěn fēicháng de shy</b><br>they would be very shy   |
| 9  | Puppies | <b>á zhēnde ma</b><br>oh? really?  |
| 10 | Kiki    | <b>zhēnde</b><br>really  |
| 11 |         | <b>nánshēng nǚshēng fēi cháng de shy</b><br>boy and girl are very shy                                  |
| 12 |         | <b>ránhòu tāmén huì màn màn de</b><br>then they would slowly   |
| 13 |         | <b>ránhòu tāmén huì kiss</b><br>then they would kiss   |
| 14 | Puppies | <b>èn</b><br>unh   |
| 15 | Kiki    | <b>dànshì měiguó de hǎo kuài a</b><br>but American (movie) is so fast!                                 |
| 16 | Puppies | <b>(LAUGHTER)</b>  |
| 17 | Kiki    | <b>&lt;@ hǎo kuài zhēnde hǎo kuài @&gt;</b><br>so fast. really so fast.                                |
| 18 | Puppies | <b>(LAUGHTER)</b>  |
| 19 |         | <b>à yīnwéi wǒ juéde zài měiguó ā</b><br>ah because I think in America ah                              |
| 20 |         | <b>à wǒ bù zhīdào zěnme shuō zhègè kiss</b><br>ah I don't know how to say this kiss                    |
| 21 |         | <b>huòzhě bǎo bǎo? bǎo?</b><br>or hug hug hug?   |
| 22 | Kiki    | <b>duì duì duì bǎo</b><br>right right right, hug   |
| 23 | Puppies | <b>bào uh hěn pǔtōng suǒ[yǐ]</b><br>hugging is very normal so  |
| 24 | Kiki    | <b>[ò]</b><br>oh   |
| 25 | Puppies | <b>yǒude rén méi guānxì</b><br>some people don't matter  |

- 26                    **lǎorén juéde zhè zhè [shì bù hǎo de]**  
old people think this this is not good  
27     Kiki        **[(LAUGHTER)]**

This excerpt demonstrates how language learning took place in situated storytelling. Semiotic means were adopted by Kiki, such as code-switching (lines 8, 11, 13) repetition (lines 4 and 6, 8 and 11, 15 and 17), repair of tone (line 22), and by Puppies, such as reactive responses (lines 3, 5) and request for linguistic assistance (lines 19–20). Through these semiotic means the participants collaboratively negotiated and constituted ZPDs for Puppies to comprehend Kiki's story and argument, respond as a co-teller, seek appropriate linguistic resources, organize an explanation, and eventually generate a narrative, and for Kiki to understand the causes and complexity of social behaviors and perceptions. Their interaction resembled the two-way enrichment approach noted by Iino (2006). In addition, Kiki made Puppies aware of two different "love story" narrative templates (Wertsch, 2002), which prompted Puppies to reflect on her own culture. Exchanges like this bore ontological significance for Puppies's growing sense of self reflexivity, as evidenced in one of her interviews: "[Kiki's questions are] always interesting, because there're some questions that I'm already aware of that are crazy to people from other countries, and there're others that I've never thought of."

In addition to telling nonpersonal narratives (Excerpt 1), they often shared their everyday experiences (Excerpt 2). As a foreigner and a Black woman, Puppies often involuntarily became the focus of strangers' photos. Once, she decided to "take revenge" on such a stranger.

## Excerpt 2

- 1     Puppies    **yíge wǒmén qù Yùyuán sìmiào**  
ah we went to Yu Garden Temple  
2                    **míng míngbái ma**  
(You) under-understand?  
3     Kiki        ò  
oh  
4     Puppies    **uh yíge rén pāi yíge zhào**  
uh a person took a pic-  
5                    **pāi wǒ gēn wǒ de péngyǒu de zhàopiàn**  
took me and my friends' picture  
6                    **suǒyǐ wǒ fàng wǒ de shǒu shǒujī zài wǒ de u[h]**  
so I put my cell cellphone at my uh  
7     Kiki        **[ā] nǐ [[de liǎn]]**  
ah your face  
8     Puppies    **[[liǎn]]shàng**  
on my face  
9     Kiki        **liǎn qiánmiàn**  
in front of (your) face  
10    Puppies    **duì liǎn qiánmiàn**  
right in front of (my) face  
11                    **tā tā de biǎoqíng kànqǐlái hěn fēicháng shēngqì kěshì**  
his his facial expression seemed very mad, but  
12    Kiki        **á**  
what?

- 13 Puppies **wǒ bù zhīdào wèishénme**  
I don't know why
- 14 **yīnwéi nǐ pāi wǒ de zhàopiàn**  
because you took my picture
- 15 **suǒyǐ wǒ wèishénme bù kěyǐ pāi nǐ de zhàopiàn**  
so why can't I take a picture of you?
- 16 Kiki **ò**  
oh
- 17 Puppies **(LAUGHTER) wǒ juéde hěn yǒu yì - hěn qíguài**  
I think it's very interes- very weird
- 18 Kiki **ài méiyǒu bànfǎ < HI méiyǒu bànfǎ HI >**  
sigh, there's nothing we can do, nothing we can do
- 19 **tāmén méiyǒu**  
they haven't
- 20 **kěnéng hěn shǎo kàndào wàiguórén**  
maybe they rarely see foreigners
- 21 Puppies **wǒ juéde**  
I think

Together with Kiki, Puppies constructed a relatively coherent and complete narrative, which included the essential dimensions of narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Puppies opened the story with a description of the location (line 1) and protagonist (lines 1, 4), organized the events in a chronological and causal manner (lines 4–6, 10, 11), explained the motive behind her action (lines 13–15), and evaluated the incident (line 17). This co-telling presented rich affordances for Puppies's language learning. First, being the primary teller is the hallmark and driver of narrative competence. Also, Puppies and Kiki used multiple semiotic resources to achieve intersubjectivity (e.g., lines 6, 7–9).

This co-telling was also significant for Puppies's sense of self, psychological well-being, and relationship with Kiki. Driven by negative emotion or trouble, conversational narrative is often a problem-solving and sense-making activity (Ochs & Capps, 2001). For newcomers and linguistic novices like Puppies, encountering problems or feeling puzzled are by no means surprising. After telling her story, Puppies was offered a resolution by Kiki through an interpretation that put them in the shoes of the strangers (lines 19–20). Meanwhile, Kiki showed her affiliation with Puppies's stance through negatively framing the man's actions (line 12) and resignation (line 18).

Excerpt 2 illustrates Puppies's resilience, sense of humor, and wit when dealing with discourse surrounding foreigners and/or Black people. Immediately after telling the less pleasant story, Puppies shared with Kiki a counterexample—a delightful encounter with a Chinese couple. When Puppies and her other African American friends were heading to the railway station, she overheard an old couple talking to each other in Chinese: “You see Black people. They're all very beautiful.” Having understood this comment, Puppies smiled, walked up, initiated a friendly conversation, and was complimented by the couple on her Chinese proficiency. In an interview, she also commented on the issue when asked if she had any negative experiences: “I haven't had any bad experience. Yeah, there've been stares and people have been trying to take pictures. But that I know that's to be expected, 'cause I don't look like anybody. So that's fine.” While Puppies problematized

the constant stares and picture taking, she downplayed the impact of the negative encounters by providing a positive story, accepting Kiki's proposed interpretation, and explaining the behavior by her high visibility. In face of adversity, Puppies anticipated the problem and chose to understand the issue from the perspective of others.

Kiki also shielded Puppies from race-related discourse. Toward the end of the semester, Puppies expressed her gratitude to Kiki in helping her learn Chinese and making her sojourn a "very happy" one, and made direct reference to the issue of race and Kiki's sensitivity to her position. Puppies contrasted her experience with that of her friend, also a Black woman living with a Chinese roommate. In her friend's case, the Chinese roommate "keep[s] asking her questions that seem targeted at race a lot," for example, on her tight-fitting clothes, short hair, and body shape. Puppies quoted, "Where do you get your clothes? I wanna wear tight clothes like you. I wanna be more sexy like you. How do you get your butt to be so big?" In contrast, Kiki never framed her questions as personal, but instead expressed curiosity about American culture and would only ask questions like "what X, Y, and Z is perceived to be in the United States?" Puppies stated: "With my roommate, I've never had her ask me like weird crazy questions. It might be because she's nervous too. But at the same time, I don't think so because she was perfectly fine asking me about Americans' view on big butts and stuff like that." In an interview, Kiki actually expressed concerns over asking Puppies certain questions, for example, why Americans seemed to develop sexual relationships so quickly, and how Black people from privileged background like Puppies are perceived. Eventually, Kiki was able to raise questions related to romantic relationships (e.g., Excerpt 1), but not those that were race-related. Nevertheless, there were times when Puppies expressed her opinions on race issues in the United States. Kiki, in this case, would assume a secondary teller role and a supportive stance, thereby discursively building more solidarity with Puppies.

From Puppies's and Kiki's case, we see that co-telling of conversational narratives in their everyday interaction afforded rich learning opportunities for both of them. What was at work was not only contextualized learning of discrete linguistic resources, for example, action verbs (Excerpt 1) and prepositions (Excerpt 2), but also the ability to narrate stories, infer others' stances and express one's own, and recognize different narrative templates and associated ideologies. Also, the practice of telling stories provided a safe space for Puppies to resolve her problematic encounters with race outside the dormitory. Being able to tell stories and disclose one's troubles not only indexed but also nurtured their friendship, which in turn opened up more access and opportunities for learning.

#### *David and his Roommate, Shawn*

Time in the residence hall with his roommate, Shawn, was also the highlight of David's semester abroad. The two held extended conversations for 3 to 4 hours per day, especially during the first half of the semester when Shawn was less busy with job hunting. Their major activities were free chatting; joke telling; discussing

social, political, and cultural issues; and solving language problems. David noted that they talked about diverse topics, no matter how private or sensitive. For example, once Shawn allowed David to read a rejection letter he had just received from a company for purposes of language learning. Their interaction not only featured conversational narratives but also the contextualized language practice of language play, or “manipulation of language that is done in a non-serious manner for either public or private enjoyment” (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p. 104). Presenting clear communicative purposes, language play, or situational humor is a key conversational practice through which interlocutors create bonds with each other and perform relational work (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Additionally, the cognitive function of communicative activities such as language play cannot be dismissed (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). For the case of David, we present one excerpt of language play to show how the practice not only supported contextualized language learning but also nurtured a sense of closeness.

Excerpt 3 illustrates a series of language play episodes incorporating various rhetoric and forms of humor that the two collaboratively produced. Shawn was playing a well-known theme song, “Waiting One Thousand Years to See You Once,” from a classic Chinese TV series, *New Legend of Madame White Snake*. David set a “play frame” (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997, p. 277) from the beginning—a hypothetical situation in which he was a singing superstar (Excerpt 3–1). The conversation then developed into situational joke telling mediated by cultural concepts and symbolism (Excerpt 3–2).

## Excerpt 3–1

- |    |       |  |
|----|-------|--|
| 1  | David | <b>qiānnián děng yīhúí</b> ((singing))<br>waiting one thousand years to see you once         |
| 2  |       | <b>[děng yīhúí ā ā</b> ((singing))]<br>wait once   |
| 3  | Shawn | <b>[wǒ wú huǐ ā ā</b> ((singing))]<br>I have no regret ah ah                                 |
| 4  | David | <b>qiānnián děng yīhúí</b> ((singing))<br>waiting one thousand years to see you once         |
| 5  |       | <b>wǒ wú huǐ ā ā</b> ((singing))<br>I have no regret ah ah                                   |
| 6  | Shawn | <HI é HI><br>unh?  |
| 7  |       | ((clips hands))  |
| 8  | David | <b>xièxiè xièxiè dàjiā xièxiè</b><br>thank you thank you everyone thank you                  |
| 9  | Shawn | <b>(LAUGHTER)</b><br>((Ten lines omitted))   |
| 10 | Shawn | <b>wǒ juéde nǐ chàng dé búcuò èi</b><br>I think you sing pretty well                         |
| 11 | David | <b>xièxiè xièxiè dàjiā</b><br>thank you thank you everyone                                   |
| 12 | Shawn | <b>(LAUGHTER)</b>  |
| 13 |       | <HI ā búcuò David hǎo xǐhuān nǐ HI> <b>(LAUGHTER)</b><br>ah not bad David I like you so much |
| 14 | David | <b>wǒ shì xīngmíng</b> <b>(LAUGHTER)</b><br>I'm a star                                       |
| 15 | Shawn | <b>(LAUGHTER)</b>  |

- 16 David **KTV de xīngmíng**  
a KTV star
- 17 Shawn **nǐ shì KTV de superstar**  
you're KTV's superstar
- 18 David **èn**  
enh  
(Two lines omitted)
- 19 David **[wǒ wǒ shì zhōng]guó de shēngyīn**  
I I'm China's voice
- 20 Shawn **zhōngguó hǎo zhōngguó hǎo shēngyīn**  
China good Voice of China
- 21 **Voice of China**

In Excerpt 3–1, instead of thanking Shawn for his compliment, David addressed an imagined audience (lines 8, 11). The change-of-address term created a humorous effect (Norrick, 2017) and was interpreted as such with Shawn's laughter (lines 9, 12). The second time around, Shawn also joined the play frame and imitated the voice of female fans by resorting to semiotic resources that index high affectivity and femininity (line 13). David crystalized the hypothetical situation by identifying himself as a star, a KTV star, and even China's voice (lines 14, 16, 21). Recognizing David's intention, made possible by their familiarity, Shawn replied that he was the *Voice of China* (lines 20–21), a popular singing show in China. The incongruity of David being a non-Chinese and the claim that he was the *Voice of China* constituted the humor. Their conversation continued in Excerpt 3–2.

## Excerpt 3–2

- 22 David **tāmén tāmen uh gěi gěi wǒ dǎdiànhuà kěshì wǒ**  
they they uh gave gave me a call but I
- 23 **wǒ méi méi jiētīng**  
I didn't didn't pick it up
- 24 Shawn **zhēn de ma**  
really?
- 25 David < @ bú[shì @> ]  
no
- 26 Shawn **[wǒ wèishén]me juéde <@ kěndìng shì @>**  
why I feel it must be
- 27 David < @ jiǎde @>  
not true
- 28 Shawn <@ X wǒ juéde yě shì X @> (LAUGHTER)  
I also think so
- 29 David **kěshì wǒ wǒ kàn le uh**  
but I I watched this uh this
- 30 **zhèigè zhōngguó hǎo hǎo shēngyīn yǒu yǒu wàiguó rén duì bù duì**  
*Voice of China* has has foreigners right
- 31 Shawn **à duì**  
ah yes
- 32 David **uh jīngcháng shì luó éluósī de rén**  
ah often are Ru-Russians
- 33 Shawn **yǒu éluósī duì**  
there are Russians right
- 34 David **yīnwèi tāmen hěn jìn**  
because they're very close
- 35 **tāmén gēn uh lí lí zhōngguó hěn jìn**  
they're very close from uh to to China

- 36 Shawn <@ **huǒchē piào bǐjiào piányí duì bú duì** @>  
train tickets are cheaper right?  
(LAUGHTER) <@ **huǒchē piào** @> (LAUGHTER)  
train tickets
- 37
- 38 David **tāmén hěn piányí ma** (LAUGHTER)  
they're very cheap?
- 39 Shawn <@ **cóng měiguó lái zhōngguó huǒchē piào bǐjiào guì** @> (LAUGHTER)  
from U.S. to China train tickets are more expensive
- 40 David (LAUGHTER)
- 41 Shawn (LAUGHTER) **nǐ nǐ[mén de]**  
you your
- 42 David [**huǒchē**] **piào**  
train tickets?
- 43 **nǐ nǐ bù kěyǐ zuò huǒchē piào**  
you can't take train tickets
- 44 Shawn **huǒ huǒ huǒchēlù hái méiyǒu xiū hǎo** (LAUGHTER)  
train train train roads are not built yet
- 45 **tiěguǐ hái méiyǒu [xiū hǎo]**  
rail roads are not built yet
- 46 David [**nǐ nǐ huì**] **nǐ** <@ **huì qù Alaska** @> **ránhòu**  
you you will you will go to Alaska then
- 47 Shawn (LAUGHTER)
- 48 David **hěn cháng hěn cháng de lù**  
very long very long road
- 49 Shawn <@ **duì** @>  
right
- 50 David **fēicháng cháng de lù**  
a very long road
- 51 Shawn <@ **yě shì zuì le** @>  
(I) too am drunk
- 52 David (LAUGHTER)

In Excerpt 3–2, David disclosed his story with the TV show (lines 22–23). Shawn was surprised (line 24) but then quickly realized that this was a joke (lines 26, 28). David explicated the reality base of his joke: There were foreigners on the show, mostly from Russia, given the geographic proximity (lines 29–30, 32, 34–35). Picking up on David's point, Shawn shifted the frame back to a playful one and asserted that cheaper train tickets were the only reason why Russian contestants participated (lines 36–37), and that train tickets from the United States are more expensive (line 39). In both occasions, David did not recognize the playfulness (lines 38, 42–43). Trains are the major means of transportation for most people in China and have thus become a cultural symbol. A frequent topic in the media and everyday conversation—the cost of train fares—in a sense organizes ordinary Chinese people's lives and potentially their ways of thinking. As shown in Shawn's absurd jokes, train ticket prices became the only determinant of competition eligibility. It was the different reality or conceptualization of mobility that these jokes were based on that presented difficulty for David. To appeal to David's understanding and ZPD, Shawn transformed the joke into the absence of railways between United States and China being the reason of Americans' absence in the show (lines 44–45). David finally indicated some comprehension and chimed in (lines 46, 48, 50). Shawn concluded the jokes with a popular stylized Internet language *yě shì zuì le* (I too am drunk; line 51) (Zhang, 2017), demonstrating a form of folk humor

that compares being drunk to the emotional state of being speechless and feeling absurd.

To summarize, Excerpts 3–1 and 3–2 shows that it was David who initiated the playful hypothetical situation, and it was Shawn who joined and contributed to the frame through hyperbole, parody, folk humor, and joke telling. The excerpt involved hypothetical situations that derived from but departed from reality, which overcame the constraints of the immediate context and initiated semiotic resources to construct a wide array of styles and identities. The jokes that Shawn developed (Excerpt 3–2) also introduced David to the different conceptualization of mobility and the symbolism of trains in China. Through discursive negotiation, Shawn revised his joke to align with David's potential ability to understand this humor.

The prominence of language play was made possible by David's advanced Chinese proficiency, as telling and understanding humor have always been a challenging territory for L2 speakers. Furthermore, his agency and active engagement in language play may also find its roots in his family background and Jewish heritage. For David, being Jewish was an integral part of his identity, most clearly evidenced in his self-selected pseudonym David Wang (King David) and the Jewish accessories that he wore every day. Once his class visited the famous Matchmaking Corner at Renmin Park, where parents brought photos and qualifications of their single sons or daughters to find marriage candidates. David happily confessed in an interview that he made two "mistakes" when a parent approached him: The first was telling the parent that he is from the United States, and the second was mentioning that he is Jewish when asked about his opinion on religion, two identities that brought him social and cultural capital in China. His Jewish identity was also made particularly relevant in the sociohistorical context of Shanghai, where Jewish refugees found asylum during WWII, an important aspect of local collective memory (Wertsch, 2002). All classes visited the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum as part of the curriculum. Upon returning, David expressed his appreciation toward the locals but was saddened by how many more were not able to find asylum. In the face of unrelenting persecution, humor—an important element of the Jewish tradition—has been employed for centuries as a form of psychological defense (Wisse, 2015). In addition, language and literacy play key roles both in Jewish secular culture and in religious observance. According to Oz and Oz-Salzberger (2012, p. 1), "Jewish continuity has always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements."

David considered humor an important element and a quality that he desired to obtain in L2 Chinese. He stated: "I'm still developing my my ... sense of humor ... my my my humor is very silly ... but I also don't understand uh uh Chi-Chinese.... I I I I will I will do some research." In response to his interest in humor, Shawn initiated a discussion on the ideologies surrounding it, which made David aware of a different perception of this topic. Shawn explained: "This I think is very easy, if, right, very easy, you don't need to learn it intentionally ... because sometimes humor, Chinese Chi- uh like we-western world would think humor is very good



right? But for China, a characteristics that China prefers ... characteristics is being serious." Prompted by David's confusion, Shawn then elucidated that being serious indicates the quality of reliability and the personality of a mountain, whereas being humorous implies instability, unreliability, and the personality of wind. Shawn not only actively participated in and assisted David to perform language play, but also involved him in metalinguistic discussion on the conflicting ideologies of and identities associated with being humorous in different cultures, thereby promoting his awareness of this practice.

In David's and Shawn's case, verbal play was a key site where contextualized language learning originated and interpersonal closeness was nurtured. Language play not only recruited semiotic tools to construct various speech styles, personas, and social identities, but also made the associated conceptual, metalinguistic, and ideological underpinnings available, relevant, and visible to David. Through joint attentional negotiation, interactions were attuned to David's ZPD. As the central discursive mechanism through which they established and maintained a close relationship, verbal play facilitated meaningful and ludic exchanges conducive to David's learning. Such language play was also made possible by their mutual understanding and willingness to develop a congenial relationship, as humor carries a modicum of interactional risk (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined everyday interactions between sojourners and Chinese roommates, with emphasis on contextualized practices, mediational means made available, and the extent to which interactions engaged participants' ZPDs. We further scrutinized the ways in which personal histories and experiences in and out of the dormitory mediated language learning and the overall quality of the sojourn. Although race and ethnicity were taken into consideration in the selection of focal participants and emerged as relevant to our analysis, these were not the main concern. However, especially given the very scant representation of African American language students in the study abroad literature (Anya, 2017) and the emphasis on racially motivated conflict in other studies (e.g., Talburt & Stewart, 1999), we are pleased to report on Puppies's high level of satisfaction with her experience.

We found that conversational narrative and language play were leading practices conducive to the participants' learning on the microgenetic and ontogenetic levels. Semiotic resources rich in cultural meanings, such as stances, personae, identities, ideologies, and narrative templates, became relevant and accessible. These mediational means were attuned to the potential abilities of the participants through moment-by-moment negotiation and growing familiarity and intersubjectivity. The rich affordances of residence hall interaction echo recent qualitative investigations of homestay talk (Kinging et al., 2016) and dormitory conversation (Diao, 2014).

Meanwhile, the significance of the contextualized practices went beyond language learning. Puppies's storytelling with Kiki provided a safe space to make

sense of and resolve problems involving how people positioned her as a foreigner of African heritage. Through language play, David and Shawn entertained each other with different speech styles and identities and built a strong sense of friendship. The conviviality Puppies and David developed with their roommates in turn promoted more meaningful interaction and language learning opportunities. While the two cases demonstrate the individual variance well documented in study abroad research (Wilkinson, 1998), they both point to the key roles of interpersonal relationships and emotional engagement (Mitchell et al., 2017). To conclude, echoing Lee (2017), what seem to be quotidian linguistic practices, for example, telling stories and playing with language, actually afford rich semiotic resources that may bear significant developmental consequences.

The findings of our study suggest that homestays are not the only settings in which language learners abroad become involved in engaging and developmentally appropriate interactions. Indeed, “intensive L2 relationships which challenge existing L2 proficiency and drive forward development” (Mitchell et al., 2017, pp. 247–248) may be found and sustained in a variety of environments, particularly when students display flexibility and resilience. These findings have three additional implications for pedagogy and study abroad program design. First, because of the prominence and significance of language practices such as conversational narratives in everyday interaction, language curricula may include more elements to facilitate students’ participation in such activities. Second, although Puppies and David appear to have enjoyed highly successful residence hall living and studying abroad, their experiences do not suggest that everyone is spared from misunderstanding and confusion. To further promote learning, awareness, and reflexivity, study abroad programs can implement pedagogical interventions engaging students in reflection on their interaction with host families or roommates by, for example, integrating audio recordings of daily conversation and analysis. Through close examination of their everyday conversation, students can share their confusion and frustration, and at the same time reflect on their own language use and dispositions. Language teachers can provide cultural insights or alternative interpretations to help students understand situations differently and possibly resolve tensions. Last, study abroad programs can involve host families and local roommates in training to enhance their awareness of potentially different discourses of race and ethnicity.

The study presents several clear limitations. To reduce intrusion into the participants’ privacy, the data include only audio recordings that disallow investigation into the multimodality of talk and learning. Although the semester-long program is typical for American students abroad, it does not allow for longitudinal study of students’ life stories. To overcome the time constraints of study abroad programs, researchers may follow individual students before, during, and after study abroad to trace their ontological development (e.g., Lee, 2017). Generalizable claims cannot emerge from case studies. However, case studies offer a vantage point to explore complex phenomena and trace change over time (Duff, 2008; van Lier, 2005) and to generate analytical generalization or insights that advance theories and new avenues for research (Yin, 2014).

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## APPENDIX A

–	truncated word
[], [[]]	speech overlap
(())	researcher's comment
<@ @>	laugh quality
<HI HI>	high pitch