



SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE: A TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the transformative learning experiences and internal mechanisms of Chinese postgraduate students in Short-Term Study Abroad (STSA) programs. This research adopts a qualitative research method, using purposive sampling and snowball sampling to conduct in-depth interviews with 15 Chinese master's students who have participated in STSA programs. The study found that the transformative learning mechanism in the STSA program presents a highly integrated path: (1) Triggering events: The conflict between external environmental heterogeneity and internal subjective expectations led to students' psychological imbalance; (2) Implementation process: Students completed cognitive reconstruction through deep critical reflection, rational discourse in social interactions, and adaptive actions; (3) Developmental effects: Students ultimately constructed a more inclusive and dialectical meaning structure and reshaped diverse values; (4) Enabling conditions: The reflective field, dialogue platform, and safety guarantees provided by the program design were the key external factors that triggered transformation. This study shows that to maximize the educational value of the STSA program, global universities and program designers should go beyond outcome orientation and focus on the design of process mechanisms.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of the internationalization of higher education, short-term study abroad (STSA) programs have evolved into a unique cross-border learning method distinct from long-term study

abroad. Due to their shorter duration, flexible organizational form, and minimal interference with students' existing academic and life arrangements, STSA is gradually becoming one of the most common and important channels for international student mobility (Goldstein, 2022).

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Globally, the growth of Chinese universities participating in STSA programs and establishing partnerships with foreign universities has been particularly rapid (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022). As an important source country of international students, the number of Chinese students studying abroad continues to increase (Huang, 2024; Li et al., 2023). Therefore, exploring the cross-cultural learning experiences of this large group of students in non-Western contexts is of great significance for understanding the global pattern of higher education.

Although STSA programs offer students valuable cross-cultural learning opportunities, their tight schedule and highly immersive nature also bring unique challenges. During the program, students need to quickly adapt to a foreign academic, social, and cultural environment, which often exposes them to a series of pressures, including cultural shock, language barriers, academic stress, and adjustment issues in daily life (Bradly et al., 2024). For Chinese students in particular, due to China's unique educational system, social cultural traditions, and collective expectations, they tend to experience intense internal cognitive conflicts when facing these cross-cultural challenges. These challenges are not only about adapting to life but also serve as a crucial opportunity for deep meaning construction.

With the widespread adoption of STSA programs, related research has been increasing. Many studies have confirmed the positive role of STSA programs in promoting the holistic development of students. These programs not only enhance academic learning and promote career development, but also cultivate students' appreciation of cultural diversity (Perry et al. 2012). In terms of cross-cultural competence, participants usually show a reduction in ethnocentrism, an enhancement in cross-cultural adaptability, and an improvement in cultural intelligence (Hachtmann, 2012; Engle & Crowne 2014). These challenging new experiences prompt students to break boundaries and form new perceptions of social issues and stereotypes (Gaia 2015), and promote personal development through self-reflection (Mather et al. 2012). However, the research results on the impact of STSA on participants' attitudes are inconsistent. Although some studies report significant improvements in students' respect and

acceptance of different cultural perspectives (Nguyen 2017; LeCrom et al. 2015), other studies have found that the cross-cultural sensitivity or cultural intelligence of the participants did not change significantly (Bloom & Miranda 2015). Nevertheless, the development of cross-cultural knowledge is still considered the most reliable learning outcome in STSA programs (Engle & Crowne 2014; Gaia 2015; Nguyen 2017).

However, the existing literature mostly focuses on evaluating the programs' effectiveness and outputs (Iqbal, 2019). In recent years, the academic community has begun to call for a shift in research focus toward an "experience-oriented" approach (Zhao & Liu, 2025). As Davis and Knight (2023) emphasized, a deep understanding of the specific process of learning is crucial for improving overseas learning programs and maximizing their educational impact. Nevertheless, there is still insufficient exploration of the underlying mechanisms of how students construct meaning and achieve cognitive transformation from specific cross-cultural experiences (Davis & Knight, 2023).

To fill this research gap, this study, based on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), analyzed the transformative learning (TL) experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in various STSA programs. The aim of this study is not only to conduct a static assessment of "learning outcomes", but also to systematically explore the "process mechanism" through which students undergo cognitive reconstruction after experiencing cross-cultural shocks. By focusing on this often overlooked yet crucial deep learning process, this study hopes to provide empirical support for understanding the deep learning of Chinese students in cross-cultural contexts, and offer theoretical references for global universities to establish and optimize STSA programs.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of transformative learning was proposed by adult educationist Jack Mezirow. It is a learning method where an individual undergoes a fundamental change in their perception of the environment around them; at the same time, it is also a process of awakening critical consciousness and reconstructing preconceived notions (Mezirow, 1991). Adults have already constructed their own worldviews and developed

a meaning model for interpreting life experiences. During subsequent growth, although individuals will continuously encounter new knowledge and new experiences, in most cases, they tend to directly incorporate these new elements into their existing cognitive frameworks to achieve the compatibility and integration of the prior and new knowledge. However, when this integration process encounters obstacles, that is, when new experiences conflict severely with the existing paradigm and form an irreconcilable “dilemma”, individuals will be forced to stop the integration. They must conduct a comprehensive examination and reflection on the established meaning model. Facing this dilemma, individuals usually have two choices: to reject new knowledge and new experiences and adhere to the original cognitive framework, or to actively correct or even reconstruct their meaning model. The second path is the core of TL.

Although Mezirow (1991) originally delineated ten phases of transformative learning, for the purpose of empirical application in the Chinese context, subsequent scholars like Hou et al. (2018) synthesized these into three core macro-stages:

- 1) Experiencing a disorienting dilemma, that is, experiencing life events that cause learners to question their internal beliefs (also known as triggering events);
- 2) Conducting critical reflection on the disorienting dilemma, thereby realizing one's limitations and areas for improvement;
- 3) Acquiring new knowledge, skills or attitudes to overcome one's limitations and achieve the transformation of one's individual conceptions.

The three-stage transformation learning theory is shown in Figure 1. When learners encounter a situation that does not match their expectations, causing them to be perplexed, the triggering event that leads to this situation is the catalyst for TL. When encountering a disorienting dilemma, learners will question their previously held beliefs and generate alternative concepts (Fletcher & Meyer, 2016). Critical reflection is considered the most effective tool and foundation for achieving the purpose of TL and is also the key to ensuring the quality and effectiveness of TL. Critical reflection refers to examining the underlying beliefs and assumptions that affect people's

experiences, which is significantly different from general reflection. Here, reflection may be a process regarding knowledge or experience, while critical reflection may include reviewing how erroneous decisions were made, internalizing the lessons learned, and considering how to avoid similar problems from recurring.

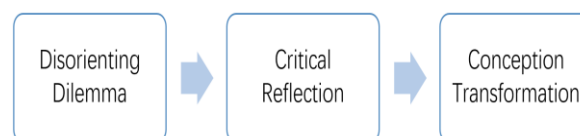


Figure 1. Three stages of TLT
Source: Adapted from Luo et al. (2018, 79)

Previous studies have shown that TL is an applicable framework for analyzing travel experiences. In a cross-cultural context, exposure to unfamiliar environments can effectively catalyze this learning process (Liu & Jiang, 2015; Stone et al., 2017). For adult learning, its “contextual nature” is of crucial importance. Many overseas learning programs are designed to facilitate such profound personal transformation (Dunn et al., 2014); at the same time, overseas journeys have been proven to yield transformative experiences (Cavender et al., 2020). This study focuses on the group of Chinese postgraduate students who participate in STSA programs. At a specific educational stage, these students seek to expand their global perspective and aspire to achieve personal growth in a cross-cultural environment. This clear goal gives their TL experiences unique exploratory value. The challenges they face in adapting to new environments, coping with cultural shocks, and pursuing personal growth provide a real and vivid field for studying the mechanisms of TL.

3 METHOD

We initially selected 8 Chinese postgraduate students using the purposive sampling method and then conducted interviews with 7 additional participants using the snowball sampling method. We found that the data had reached saturation, meaning no new themes emerged. Therefore, we set the interview sample size at 15 and numbered them as A1-A15. The information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1. The sample consisted of male and female participants in an 8:7 ratio, and third- and second-year students in a 3:2 ratio. Additionally, the participants were evenly



distributed across various academic departments. All the students tended to prefer online conversations, so we used the Tencent Voov Meeting platform to conduct interviews. Online interviews can flexibly arrange the interview time and can reduce the pressure associated with face-to-face communication, making it more conducive for the participants to express their opinions and speak freely. More importantly, online interviews have no location restrictions, which can greatly facilitate participation for the interviewed students. Our data collection period was from January to March 2026. Each interview lasted about 40

minutes, resulting in nearly 100,000 words of Chinese text materials. The interview topics mainly covered “Background and Expectations”, “Confusion and Difficulties”, “Critical Reflection”, and “Conceptual Transformation”.

Throughout the whole process of this study, ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Before conducting the data analysis, approval from the relevant institutions was obtained, and verbal consent was gained from each participant. All data have been anonymized and strictly kept confidential.

Table 1. *Demographic information of the participants*

Code	Gender	Duration	Department	Destination
A1	Male	7 days	College of Computer and Information Science	Italy
A2	Female	7 days	College of State Governance	Singapore
A3	Male	90 days	Law School	Sweden
A4	Male	14 days	College of Computer and Information Science	Italy
A5	Male	14 days	Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities	Australia
A6	Female	7 days	College of State Governance	Japan
A7	Female	14 days	Law School	Australia
A8	Male	7 days	College of Computer and Information Science	Singapore
A9	Female	14 days	School of Marxism	Australia, Greece
A10	Female	21 days	Faculty of Education	Canada
A11	Female	7 days	College of State Governance	Japan
A12	Male	31 days	Faculty of Psychology	United States
A13	Male	10 days	College of Veterinary Medicine	South Korea
A14	Male	14 days	College of Plant Protection	Italy
A15	Female	14 days	Faculty of Education	New Zealand

This study employed thematic analysis and utilized the NVivo 14 software to code the transcripts. The coding process strictly followed the six steps of the thematic analysis method. The first step was to familiarize oneself with the data. The researcher transcribed all the interview recordings into nearly 100,000 words of text and read them repeatedly. The second step was to conduct initial coding using NVivo 14, adhering to the principle of openness, and conducting micro-coding sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph for each document, generating 79 initial nodes. The third step was to search for themes,

classifying and summarizing the scattered initial codes according to internal logic (such as cognitive conflicts, adaptation challenges), forming preliminary themes. The fourth step was to review themes, returning to the original materials to verify whether the preliminary themes could accurately reflect the experiences of the respondents. The fifth step was to combine the TLT definition and name the core themes, defining and naming the themes, ultimately refining into 4 progressive core themes. The final step was to write the research findings. Table 2 shows the analytical process.

Table 2. *Thematic Analysis Framework*

Overarching Themes	Preliminary Themes	Examples of Initial Codes
1. Triggering Events for TL	Cognitive Conflict	Developmental cognitive bias; Educational stereotype; Cultural norm assumptions
	Adaptation Challenges	Climate/diet unadaptability; Social rule adaptation pressure; Time-zone social anxiety
	Communication Dilemmas	Accent comprehension barriers; Expression and thinking differences
2. Implementation Process of TL	Critical Reflection	Dialectical cognitive shift; Deconstructing cultural stereotypes; Self-awareness reconstruction
	Cross-Cultural Dialogue	Classroom collaboration; Reaching consensus through conflict
	Adaptive Actions	Optimizing communication strategies; Behavioral adaptation
	Environmental Support	Peer emotional support; Safety guarantees from leaders
3. Outcomes of Global Competence	Multicultural Inclusiveness	Enhancing cultural inclusiveness; Eliminating group stereotypes; Building cultural confidence
	Global Issue Cognition	Deepening understanding of global issues; Broadening academic frontiers
	Cross-Cultural Communication	Boosting foreign language confidence; Enhancing teamwork skills
	Global Career Intention	Breaking career planning boundaries; Expanding global academic vision
4. Enabling Conditions	Program Immersion Design	High-density arrangements; Autonomous exploration space
	Cross-Cultural Interaction Design	Multinational group collaboration; Local student pairing
	Pre-departure Support	Pre-training on cultural knowledge; Safety guarantees

The initial sentence-by-sentence coding for this study was independently completed by the second author. To ensure the objectivity and reliability of the coding, the first researcher conducted cross-checking. Both authors independently reviewed the initial coding and the preliminary themes. When the two researchers had disagreements on the coding attribution or theme naming, they would return to the original interview text for in-depth discussion until a consensus was reached. This approach effectively improved the internal reliability of the study.

To minimize potential researcher bias and enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative

analysis, several strategies were rigorously applied throughout the study. The first is investigator triangulation as mentioned. Second, both authors continuously evaluated the emergence of new codes during the analysis process. By the 15th interview, no new significant themes or codes emerged, indicating data saturation. This ensured that the findings comprehensively reflected the collective experiences of the sample rather than isolated, biased observations. Third, the analysis was grounded in participants' verbatim quotes (thick descriptions) to keep conclusions firmly tethered to students' original voices and limit interpretive bias.



4 FINDINGS

4.1 Triggering events for TL

TL begins when the individual's original meaning structure fails, leading to a disorienting dilemma. Data shows that this dilemma is the result of a sharp collision between the external objective heterogeneous context and the internal subjective expectation.

Heterogeneity of external contexts

The multi-dimensional impacts of the external environment have profoundly challenged the original cognitive frameworks of the students. At the macro level of social cognition, the long-established "Western centrism" stereotype that the students had formed was shattered. "After firsthand contact, I discovered that the development in Europe seemed to have stagnated, which was in sharp contrast to the perfect impression obtained from the internet. Only then did they realize how rapidly their home country was developing". (A1) This gap between the objective reality and the subjective assumptions forced the students to seek new explanatory frameworks. At the micro level of life experiences, the differences in infrastructure and living habits posed real challenges. "The least adaptable aspect was the diet; the local food was hard to eat." (A1) These life frictions transformed the external conflicts into necessary survival pressures that needed to be addressed.

Internal psychological dissonance

External shocks are transformed into inner anxiety and a sense of marginalization, becoming the internal tension that drives cognition. For instance, two participants stated:

- "As an outsider, due to the time difference, my schedule often differs from that of my domestic relatives." (A15)
- "Lack of communication partners, going alone every day, easily leads to depression or despondency." (A3)

The dual experiences of 'time-zone-induced social anxiety' and an 'outsider identity' destabilize the students' pre-existing self-identity. In turn, this psychological disequilibrium catalyzes the intrinsic motivation required for active cognitive reconstruction.

4.2 Implementation Process of TL

The core of TL lies in the reconfiguration of the meaning structure. This is a dynamic process that is guided by internal reflection, verified in external social interactions, and ultimately translated into action.

Deep operation of critical reflection

The interview revealed that the students' reflections reached the "premise reflection" level, that is, they questioned the underlying value assumptions they had previously held. In terms of self-awareness, the students broke away from their previous mindset. "After using AI tools, I realized that the traditional belief that 'as long as you work hard and don't worry about speed' was incorrect." (A14) In terms of cultural cognition, the students shifted from being self-centered to being open and inclusive. "After gaining a deep understanding of the development logic of different cultures, I changed my previous judgment of superiority and inferiority and realized that every culture has its own valid rationale for existing." (A3) This marks an important growth in the students' multicultural cognition.

Rational verification through social dialogue

Rational discourse is the key to testing the new meaning structure. External interaction accelerates the social verification of internal reflection. Firstly, participants reached consensus in spontaneous life conflicts. "Facing the conflict in lifestyle caused by cooking fumes, we made effective adjustments through communication and mutual concessions." (A3) Students exercised cross-cultural communication skills by negotiating rules through dialogue.

Secondly, students reorganized their cognition in structured team collaboration. "I adjusted my communication method, extracted viewpoints using a logical framework and combined them with Chinese cases. Eventually, I gained recognition from foreign classmates." (A11)

Furthermore, dialogue eliminated stereotypes. "It was widely reported that foreign countries discriminated against Chinese students, but after actual contact, we found that they were very willing to communicate. This taught me to view problems dialectically and not blindly believe online comments." (A4) This cognitive transformation

ultimately led to an increase in students' willingness to interact.

Consolidation through adaptive action

Driven by reflection and dialogue, the students took adaptive actions. "I gradually got used to the local communication style and took the initiative to make changes, greeting people like the locals." (A12) This action was not merely a behavioral imitation but also a breakthrough in psychological boundaries, further consolidating the new self-awareness.

4.3 Outcomes of Global Competence Development

TL has led to a fundamental transformation in students' global competence at the cognitive, attitudinal and conceptual levels. Firstly, students have established a cognitive boundary that considers "differences" as the norm. "After seeing the differences in various countries, my mind has become broader, more inclusive, and I am able to slow down moderately in the fast-paced environment." (A9) They are no longer passive adaptors but actively integrate the logic of multiculturalism into their own value system. Secondly, through comparative reflection, students have developed rational cultural confidence and an equal attitude towards interaction. On one hand, they have formed a strengthened home-culture identity. "After observing the social environment in foreign countries, I better understood the difficulty of China's development and thus developed a strong cultural confidence." (A3) On the other hand, they have established an equal attitude towards cross-cultural interaction. "Now I can communicate with all groups with equal footing and confidence, and I have learned to accept diverse living rhythms, no longer believing that 'speed is everything'." (A9) This reshaping of values has a profound and lasting impact.

4.4 Enabling Conditions

The external supporting factors such as the design of the STSA program precisely match the psychological needs of students, effectively empowering the TL process. Firstly, the STSA program provides a field for reflection. The immersive local experience pushes students into real cultural dilemmas. "The experience in the host

family was the most profound. Facing differences in eating habits and communication barriers caused by the landlord's accent, I had to actively solve the problems by using translation software". (A9) This environment's immersive nature stimulated students' urgent need to resolve cognitive conflicts. Secondly, the STSA program builds a platform for dialogue. The mandatory interactive design of the program reduces the threshold for cross-cultural social interaction. "In cross-national group cooperation, when facing differences in opinions and poor communication, we had to actively negotiate and communicate." (A11) Such design forces students to step out of their comfort zone, gain positive feedback through interaction, and enhance their confidence in communication. Finally, the STSA program also provides a safe guarantee. This is mainly manifested in the support from teachers and peers, which builds an emotional buffer zone. "The team leader (teacher) provided a great sense of security and assistance in a foreign country" (A10); at the same time, "peers effectively compensated for the sense of loneliness" (A9, A15). The external support of the team is internalized by students as their psychological strength, enabling them to face cultural conflicts instead of retreating, and ensuring the smooth progress of TL.

5 DISCUSSION

TL begins with a disorienting dilemma. In STSA programs, this predicament is systematically triggered through three paths:

- 1) The first is the change of the environment. The program separates students from their familiar cultural base and places them in an environment with extremely unfamiliar infrastructure, climate, and lifestyle.
- 2) The second is the transformation of identity roles. The identity of "learner" forces students to deeply engage rather than merely observing. Additionally, the continuous daily friction turns cross-cultural adaptation from an abstract concept into a practical issue related to daily living.
- 3) The third, and the most crucial point, is the gap between expectation and reality.

Students' preconceptions about developed countries, educational models, and social norms encounter a comprehensive challenge here. The



core function of this triggering mechanism lies in “problematization”. It transforms students’ accustomed things into issues that require re-examination, thereby breaking their state of “cognitive closure” and bringing the original meaning structure to the conscious level for inspection. This problematization process is particularly critical for Chinese students, who are deeply influenced by a teacher-centered, collective educational habitus, forcing them to negotiate their identity in a more individualized and interactive Western academic setting within a highly compressed time frame. Ultimately, the effectiveness of the program design depends on whether the cognitive challenge is appropriate:

- 1) If the challenge is excessive, it will cause students to adopt defensive avoidance;
- 2) if the challenge is insufficient, it will not form the necessary cognitive tension.

Reflection is the soul of TL, and its depth determines the level of transformation. The scenarios provided by the program support students to progress in their reflections, from content reflection to process reflection, and finally to premise reflection. Specifically, at the content reflection level, students describe what happened and what they perceived; at the process reflection level, students examine how they responded and whether the strategies were effective; at the premise reflection level, some students begin to touch upon “why I made such assumptions” and “where these ideas came from”. Some students successfully moved to the deepest level and began to question their deep-seated assumptions. For example, student A14 reflected on the value premise of “hard work is correct”, while student A3 reconstructed the cultural cognition of “cultural differences have distinct rationales”. For the reflection mechanism to function effectively, two conditions are required. One is to maintain cognitive tension, and the other is to provide structural reflection time guarantees. In other words, “the perplexing situation” needs to continuously stimulate students; at the same time, the program needs to reserve time for students to explore and review autonomously during the high-density schedule, to support them to ascend from “immediate response” to “systematic cognitive integration”.

The reconstruction of an individual’s meaning must be achieved through rational dialogue. STSA programs encourage students to actively express themselves, jointly examine their past selves, provide new interpretations and accept constructive challenges, to test the rationality of their new hypotheses. This program mainly completes this verification process through two interactive designs, “institutionalization” and “immersion in daily life”. Firstly, the program conducts activities such as multi-national group collaboration, local student pairing, and academic discussions. These institutionalized designs create mandatory scenarios for the confrontation and integration of viewpoints. Secondly, the program provides round-the-clock cross-cultural contact by having students integrate into host families and participate in daily communication. This everyday-life design makes conflict negotiation and consensus attainment inevitable. The key function of the dialogue mechanism lies in the confirmation of individual cognitive conflicts through others’ feedback, and the transformation of new hypotheses from individual speculation to a shared social reality. The case of A11 typifies this mechanism. “The communication method was adjusted, starting with the case of environmental governance in China, and viewpoints were refined using a logical framework. As a result, the viewpoints were recognized.” Feedback confirmation strengthened the new meaning structure.

The new meaning structures generated by transformation learning need to be consolidated through role-playing and behavioral practice. At this stage, the program mainly provides support to students in three aspects. Firstly, it offers opportunities for adaptive actions. Students can actively adjust their communication strategies and social behaviors. Secondly, it gives students new roles. The program encourages students to act as cultural communicators in cross-cultural teams and actively participate in various dialogues and exchanges. Finally, it links key experiences with long-term planning. The program guides students to adjust their research directions and reconstruct their future career ideals. The core of this integration mechanism lies in achieving the leap from “knowledge to action”. The newly acquired meanings no longer remain only at the cognitive level but are strengthened through the feedback of

practice and eventually form relatively stable behavioral tendencies. The case of student A3 is an embodiment of this leap. A3 broke away from the mindset of making choices only within a narrow legal framework and instead hoped to explore the diverse meanings of life, eventually combining his research direction with artificial intelligence (AI).

The above four mechanisms are interlinked. Specifically, the triggering mechanism provides materials for reflection, the reflection mechanism provides content for dialogue, the dialogue mechanism provides validation for integration, and the integration mechanism may trigger new cognitive dilemmas. These steps together form an upward spiraling structure. However, the particularity of STSA programs lies in their very limited time. This places higher demands on the precision of program design. On one hand, to overcome the time pressure, the program must carefully embed “reflection guidance” into the itinerary; on the other hand, to improve communication efficiency, the program must provide structured institutional mechanisms for the “dialogue platform”.

Mezirow (1991) pointed out that excessive cognitive challenges would lead learners to adopt defensive withdrawal, while insufficient challenges would fail to stimulate sufficient cognitive tension. Therefore, the STSA program design should place learners in a “tolerable confusion” state. Additionally, the program needs to be structured in a way that ensures participants have the opportunity for equal participation and authentic dialogue, thereby preventing interpersonal interactions from becoming superficial. The STSA program should also allocate sufficient time for students’ reflection sessions. As Cranton (2006) emphasized, effective reflection requires sufficient psychological space; only with this condition can students complete the processing and transformation from sensory experience to deep meaning. Without this time guarantee, the intensive schedule of STSA programs often leads to fragmented experiences for students, thereby hindering their effective cognitive integration.

The findings of this study not only confirm but also further expand the previous research on STSA learning experiences. Consistent with previous studies, the participants reported changes in

cross-cultural awareness, cultural adaptability, self-understanding, and an open attitude towards diversity, which are widely regarded as important outcomes of the STSA program (Engle & Crowne, 2014; Gaia, 2015; Nguyen, 2017). Like studies that emphasize the personal and professional value of overseas learning experiences (Mather et al., 2012), this study also found that students developed greater confidence, a broader perspective, and a stronger willingness for cross-cultural communication.

However, this study goes beyond previous outcome – oriented research and explains the way such changes occur. The existing STSA literature has extensively documented the benefits that students gain from STSA programs, including language confidence, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural sensitivity, and personal growth (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Martinsen, 2010). However, these achievements are often presented as independent accomplishments rather than interconnected parts within the learning process. This study shows that students’ transformation follows a comprehensive path: cross-cultural confusion first breaks their existing assumptions; critical reflection enables them to examine the sources of these assumptions; social dialogue provides opportunities to test and revise emerging interpretations; adaptive actions consolidate the new meaning structure. In this sense, this study responds to the recent call for a greater emphasis on experiential and process understanding in STSA learning (Davis & Knight, 2023; Zhao & Liu, 2025).

These findings also help explain why previous research reports have inconsistent results for the STSA program. Some studies found significant improvements in students’ cross-cultural attitudes and acceptance of cultural differences (LeCrom et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2017), while others reported limited changes in cultural sensitivity or cultural intelligence (Bloom & Miranda, 2015). This study suggests that these differences may not only be related to the duration of the program or the destination, but also to whether the program provides sufficient conditions for TL. Just having cross – cultural exposure does not automatically lead to transformation. When confusing experiences are accompanied by structured reflection, meaningful conversations, and emotional support, students are more likely to

undergo profound changes. Without these facilitating conditions, students may remain at the stage of behavioral adaptation or defensive avoidance and cannot achieve fundamental – level reflection.

The transformation process detailed in this study holds particular significance within the Chinese educational and cultural context. When many Chinese students join the STSA program, their learning tendencies are shaped by teacher – centered teaching, exam – oriented education, respect for authority, and collective expectations. These previous educational experiences may have accustomed students to structured knowledge transmission rather than open discussions, critical inquiries, and spontaneous cross – cultural interactions. Therefore, when they encounter more dialogic, egalitarian, or student – centered academic environments abroad, this experience generates a strong cognitive tension. This tension is not merely an issue of adaptation; rather, it serves as a trigger for reexamining deeper assumptions regarding learning, communication, culture, and self-positioning.

The contributions of this research are twofold. Theoretically, traditional TLT research usually focuses on long – term adult learning experiences. However, this study extends the empirical application of TLT to STSA contexts by demonstrating how transformative cognitive restructuring can be achieved within a highly compressed timeframe. We found that the STSA environment played a strong catalytic role, and the density of external heterogeneity accelerated the transition from “content reflection” to “premise reflection”. Contextually, this study breaks the Western – centric paradigm in the STSA research and captures the specific transformation trajectory of Chinese graduate students. It provides new understandings of how non – Western students negotiate their unique socio – cultural scripts – such as family collectivist expectations and a structured educational habitus – when engaging with Western pedagogical models.

6 CONCLUSION

This study systematically revealed the mechanism of TL in a cross-cultural context by analyzing the experiences of Chinese graduate students in STSA programs. The research found that TL

begins with the “disorienting dilemma” triggered by both external cultural shock and internal cognitive dissonance. Under this trigger, students undergo a dynamic process centered on deep critical reflection, verified through social dialogue, and ultimately achieved through adaptive actions to achieve cognitive integration. Not all students were able to complete the entire process of TL. Some participants remained at the defensive withdrawal stage, merely making behavioral compromises without delving into the premise reflection.

The research results indicate that the key to the success of STSA programs lies in elaborate design. It requires achieving a balance between providing sufficient cognitive tension and avoiding defensive withdrawal, creating a “tolerable disorientating dilemma”. At the same time, institutional design must be implemented to guarantee a structured space for equal dialogue and in-depth reflection among participants. These external supporting conditions match the internal psychological needs of students, jointly enabling the complete TL chain.

The implications of this study lie in the fact that the evaluation of the value of STSA programs should shift from being solely outcome-oriented to focusing on the depth of the learning process. Future program design and research should place greater emphasis on how to systematically create an environment that supports reflection, dialogue, and integration, to facilitate students to achieve profound and lasting meaning reconstruction within a limited time frame.

Several limitations must be acknowledged to inform future research. First, the sample in this research is small and homogeneous, made up only of Chinese postgraduates. Due to the deep embedding of the cognitive baseline, educational habitus and cross – cultural barriers within China's particular socio – cultural setting, the results cannot be generalized to students who come from other socio – cultural settings, i.e., different cultures or educational backgrounds (undergraduate students) or individualistic cultures. The second limitation of the study is due to the use of retrospective self – report interview data. Even though interviews are good tools for meaning – making, they have limitations of recall bias and social desirability bias. This means that

although the change in the students' cognition is captured through the interviews, it is *perceived* change and not objectively observed behavior changes. Reflective journals, program evaluations, or participant observations in future studies would help make a better evaluation of the same. Third,

the study concentrates on the movement of students from an Eastern setting into Western or developed contexts. It is not clear how transferable the mechanisms identified, especially the disorienting dilemma triggers, to cross – cultural mobility in the opposite direction are.

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