Presojourn Language and (Inter)Cultural Development

Prior to the sojourn, the four case participants (Nora, Mimi, Lana, and Jade) took part in the predeparture phase of the SES on their home campus in Hong Kong. As their course instructor in the ethnography and intercultural communication courses, we became well acquainted with each other during this 14-week period. As they shared their experiences, thoughts, and emotions, with me, I gained more understanding and appreciation of their language, (inter)cultural, and identity development before the sojourn in England.

After providing a brief profile of each case participant, this chapter offers insight into their presojourn language ability and usage, self-identity, and (inter)cultural sensitivity. I also explore their reaction to the home institution’s hotly debated internationalization and medium-of-instruction policies. Throughout this chapter, I link their oral and written narratives with their Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) scores (on entry and after the presojourn preparation). This allows us to track changes in their intercultural awareness, identity, and readiness for study and residence abroad in the months leading up to the sojourn. The written narratives were in English and excerpts are in their original form. All of the young women opted to do their presojourn interview in Cantonese and efforts were made to retain the nuances and emotions of the discourse in the translation.

Profiles

By way of an interview, surveys, and narrative, all the young women provided insight into their personality, family background, and ambitions. Their revelations help to better understand their unique trajectories.
Nora

When I first met Nora she was quite reserved and often lost in her own thoughts. In the presojourn interview, she described herself as “an introvert,” and “the kind of person who’s not that passionate.” “I may seem very quiet and cool,” she explained, “but when I get to know people, I become more talkative and they realize I’ve got a sense of humor.” Nora later revealed more about her personality and interests on her homestay placement form: “I enjoy listening to music and playing the piano. I love singing. Music is my life! Not only am I interested in Canto-pop, I like classical music, operas, and church music. I also like reading and going to the cinema with friends.” At University, she opted to major in English and joined several campus organizations: the drama club, the English society, a choral group, and a college society.

An only child, Nora was very close to her parents and decided to live on campus to become more independent. Her father, a secondary school graduate and owner of a publishing company, occasionally communicated with clients in English. Her mother, a housewife, did not complete secondary school and spoke one language, Cantonese. With her family, Nora had visited several South East Asian countries and, as a university student, she had traveled to Taipei and Shanghai with friends. Most trips were short, organized tours for Cantonese speakers. On entry into the SES, Nora aspired to do postgraduate studies in English Literature, drama, or translation and become a reporter for a local English newspaper.

Mimi

Mimi, a vivacious 20-year-old with a flare for the dramatic, saw herself as “friendly, enthusiastic, and cheerful”: “I’m an outgoing girl who always wears her smiley face and is, indeed, very talkative. Though hilarious sometimes, I’m also a mature person ready to face different, new challenges” (homestay placement form). She had a wide range of interests: “My hobbies are writing, watching movies and dramas, listening to music, singing, and, of course, reading. I love cooking creatively, too! I love to try fancy and new dishes” (interview). At University, she participated in many student organizations, often assuming a leadership role such as President of the Chinese Association and Chair of the English Society.

Her mother, a widow from Mainland China, had six children, all of whom were born and raised in Hong Kong. Mimi’s elder siblings were in the workforce; the younger ones were still in school. None of her family members spoke English at home or interacted across cultures.