

Diverging outcomes:

The impact of study abroad on two Japanese learners of English

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Background

- I have lived in Japan for almost 15 years
- Borders are growing increasingly indistinct
- Respond to the calls of scholars such as Block (2007) and Kinginger (2013)
- Despite the large numbers of Japanese high school students which travel abroad each year (over 168,000 in 2014), they are essentially absent from SA literature.

Key Concepts

- Post-structuralist notions of identity
- Ambivalence and critical experiences
- Individual differences

Identity

- Drawing on the work of theorists such as Bakhtin(1981), Bourdieu (1977) and Weedon (1996) post-structuralist notions of identity see it as:
 - “multiple, conflictual, negotiated and evolving”
(Canagarajah, 2004)
 - “fragmented and contested in nature” (Block, 2007)
- “...when we learn a language we are also forming a sense of self” (Jackson, 2008, p.34)

Identity

- “Individuals are both the site and subjects of discursive struggle for their identity...the individual is constantly subjected to discourse. In thought, speech or writing individuals of necessity commit themselves to specific subject positions and embrace quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments” (Weedon, 1996, p. 93-94).

Critical experiences

- “By critical experiences I mean periods of time during which prolonged contact with an L2 and a new and different cultural setting causes irreversible destabilization of the individual’s sense of self” (Block, 2002, p.4)
- These experiences lead a learner to question the cultural and linguistic norms which have up until that point formed the foundations of who they are and what they believe about the world.
- Not exclusive to study abroad but more likely to occur in situations where the cultural and linguistic setting is different.
- Result in the learner experiencing ambivalence

Ambivalence

- “Ambivalence... is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly and to choose between alternative actions.”
- “The situation turns ambivalent if the linguistic tools...prove inadequate...None of the learned patterns could be proper in an ambivalent situation – or more than one of the learned patterns could be applied; whatever is the case, the outcome is the feeling of indecision, undecidability, and hence loss of control” (Bauman, 1991, p. 1)

Individual differences (ID)

- “It has been long observed that there is a particularly wide variation among language learners in terms of their ultimate success in mastering an L2” (Dörnyei, 2005).
- Dörnyei’s taxonomy includes (but is not limited to):
 - Personality, Temperament, and Mood
 - Language Aptitude
 - Motivation and ‘Self-Motivation’
 - Learning Styles and Cognitive Styles

IDs and SA

- Early SA research also soon found that individual outcomes were highly variable, e.g. DeKeyser's (1991) study of American learners of Spanish.
- How participants react to the ambivalence they encounter when studying abroad is heavily influenced by IDs including their personalities and social histories and has repercussions for their relationship to the TL both during and after SA.

Methodology

- Pre- and post-sojourn semi-structured interviews
- Daily journal during program
- Data recorded in Japanese, collated and submitted to thematic analysis
- All quotations in this presentation have been translated by myself to English

Participants

Mari: 1st year of high school (equivalent to Year 10)

Ami: 2nd year of high school (equivalent to Year 11)

- Both female Japanese students at an elite, private high school
- Both in regular EFL classes with Japanese (4 hours p/w) and native-speaking teachers (2 hours p/w) achieving mid-to-high level grades
- Both identified influences related to English as motivating their decision to join the exchange program

Program

Homestay for two and a half weeks in the north of England. Involved attending school with exchange partner as well as extra-curricular activities.

Pre-departure: Mari

- 3 key influences in decision:
 - Mother who had lived in England as a child
 - Studying English in junior high school
 - Reading books about England

“...this is the period of life where I’m still absorbing things from everywhere, for example coming to school and studying ... this could be the period that I’m most actively moving between these *en*”

Pre-departure: Ami

- 2 key influences:
 - Had lived in the US for 4 years as a child but had forgotten her English and wanted to reconnect with that past
 - A positive review of the program from another girl in her “club” who had participated the previous year
- Saw herself as a typical Japanese high school girl with “straight black hair like the majority, I don’t have the type of personality that stands out, my grades are average”

During exchange: Mari

Critical Experience

- Began to feel mentally drained from the effort of communicating in English
- During a multi-day trip to the countryside with other exchange partner groups she found an escape from the need to communicate in English with fellow Japanese students

During Exchange: Mari

Ambivalence

“I’ve gone from being unable to communicate except for English back to living in Japanese...it’s both a relief and a bit of a disappointment.”

“I really feel my host and me growing apart more each day...this is becoming more like a school trip.”

Attempt to resolve

- Concluded that she didn’t want to be someone who “passively absorbs cultural experiences...as a guest” and tried to foster “cultural exchange” with her host for the rest of the program

During exchange: Ami

Critical Experience

“I honestly couldn’t understand what was being said...and people’s displeasure would be shown quite openly on their faces...the only thing I could do was to try and fit in with the host family’s way of doing things. That was all I could do.”

During Exchange: Ami

Ambivalence

“I couldn’t really blend in, I was the only Japanese surrounded by English people and I was like the representative of Japan, I became what all Japanese are like to them.”

Attempt to resolve

- Began to “long for Japanese food and Japanese conversation.”
Retreated into her identity as Japanese by speaking Japanese to herself in her room

Post-exchange: Mari

“...not studying English just to study English but...I strongly felt that it’s completely necessary in order to remove barriers.”

“What I want to do in the future isn’t [just] use English...I need English to do things and it’s possible I will go overseas to study that.”

“Until now I sensed that I was in some kinds of *en* but...I’m not in the collected space that they all occupy...I realized that I’m a separate entity to all that.”

Post-exchange: Ami

“ There was nothing I could do if I didn’t understand, as I had been placed in an environment where I was the only Japanese I just had to understand by myself”

“I felt like I wanted to tell people about Japanese culture but I never had the chance, I was never able to really fit in... I guess when I think about it, it’s probably fine to drink something during class, but I felt opposed to it and I think that’s because I went there as a Japanese.”

Diverging outcomes

- Mari finds the experience draining and even confrontational at times yet, in the end has a similar revelation to the other Japanese women who appear in SA literature (e.g. Kobayashi, 2007; Takahashi, 2012). The experience provides a window to new opportunities through English-mediated subject positions.
- Ami also finds the experience draining and confrontational at times and retreats into her identity of being “Japanese”, speaking to herself in Japanese and craving Japanese food, basically being homesick.

Critical experiences

- In the limited context of these students it appears that how they handled the ambivalence which came from being thrust into unfamiliar linguistic and cultural contexts led to the outcomes they reported.
- Both students found communicating in a second language and dealing with differing cultural norms to be exhausting

The role of identity and social histories

- **Ami:** historical connection to English which she wanted to rekindle, yet her language ability proved inadequate for smooth communication leading her to feel despondent. Instead she found reaffirmation of her identity as a Japanese
- **Mari:** felt confined to participating in particular social circles which required certain behaviors. SA allowed her to begin exploring identities outside of those circles.

FINDINGS & QUESTIONS

- Even short-term SA programs can have consequences for second-language identities
- Study abroad is often seen as a “life-changing” and “mind-broadening” experience, yet it seems that the opposite was true for Ami
- While student identities were certainly subject to turmoil as a result of their experience, what role did ID and social histories play in how they were resolved?

Findings & Questions

- Would it have been possible to predict that Ami would struggle with the experience and provide intervention?
- Given the repercussions for Ami and Mari's second language identities greater emphasis should be payed the "whole" individual in future study (as per Coleman, 2013)

Coleman (2013)

“The study abroad experience never has just one single outcome or objective...linguists, who focus principally on study abroad as a language learning activity...need to acknowledge that for educational researchers, as indeed for students themselves, the foreign language is just one aspect of a complex phenomenon with multiple outcomes” (p. 24)

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