

# Second Language Identity in a Study Abroad Context

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This is a case study of a Japanese university student who participated in a three-week study abroad program on the campus of a small, private university in the mid-western United States. Program participants stayed in dormitories on the university campus, took part in a weekend homestay with local families, studied English, and participated in numerous extra-curricular activities both on and off campus.

## Participant and Methods

The participant, Maiko, was a second year student at a university in Tokyo. Her listening and speaking skills were slightly higher than most of the other study abroad program participants. Her TOEIC score of 515 was the highest among the group. Maiko and another program participant, Ryuno, were good friends at university before the program. They shared a room together at the study abroad site and spent most of their free time together during the program.

Data were gathered through on-site interviews by the researcher, and through the participant's written responses to questions about the study abroad program.

## Narrative Inquiry

The primary analytical tool employed in examining Maiko's experience is narrative inquiry. In the early 1990s, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted that narrative inquiry was increasingly being used in studies of educational experience. Since that time, interest in narrative techniques has grown in research on education, but it is only in recent years that these methods have begun to be used in studies of second language learning (Benson, Chik, Gao, Huang, & Wang, 2009). Narrative inquiry is one of many qualitative research methods that have generated interest among second language learning researchers as part of the sociocultural turn in second language learning studies (Bell, 2002; Canagarajah, 2006; Davis, 1995; Lantolf, 2000; Lazaraton, 1995; Pavlenko, 2002; Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

Much of the interest in narrative among researchers on education derives from and finds support in Jerome Bruner's (1986) argument that there are "two modes of thought." They are the logico-scientific mode and the narrative mode. The two modes function differently and each has its own operating principles and its own criteria for well-formedness. The logico-scientific mode finds its expression in the pos-

ivist scientific research paradigm; its tools are logic and mathematics. The narrative mode is expressed through story. Bruner believes that both approaches can reveal important truths about the world. He also noted that, “as with the stereoscope, depth is better achieved by looking from two points at once” (p.10). Furthermore, the logico-scientific mode, in its reach for abstraction, “disclaims in principle any explanatory value at all where the particular is concerned” (p.15). Narrative inquiry, however, is well-suited to the exploration of individual experience within a specific context.

Other practitioners and advocates of narrative inquiry justify its value as a research tool in terms similar to Bruner’s. Polkinghorne (1988) associated narrative inquiry with the human sciences, a distinction parallel to Bruner’s between the logico-scientific mode and the narrative mode. Narrative is said to be the means by which humans organize and make meaningful their experience (Casanave, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Linde, 1993; Lyons & La Boskey, 2002; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Writing stories in itself is also seen as a research tool (Richardson, 1997, 2000).

Narrative can display human goals, motivations, and intentions (Bruner, 1986, 1996; Linde, 1993; Richardson, 1997). Action is influenced by an individual’s desires, beliefs, and conception of self. Narrative can reveal these influences, and at the same time demonstrate an individual’s continuous reinterpretation of her past, reassessment of her possibilities, and redefinition of her goals.

Narrative is also the means by which people communicate their sense of self and negotiate their identity with others (Josselson, 2006; Linde, 1993; Taylor, 2006). In this study, the interviews and the participant’s written reports reveal an individual trying to explain who she is, discover new things about herself, and reposition herself in the world. One way to accomplish this is by telling stories.

Narrative further provides a unique view of the human experience of time (Bruner, 1996; Mishler, 2006; Richardson, 1997). A consideration of a participant’s experience of time and perception of time can shed light on goals and motivations. In narrative time, meaning becomes embodied through the significance assigned to events by a story’s protagonist or narrator. Narrative sequence—past, present, future—can also be interpreted through psychological descriptions of the human experience of time (Packard & Conway, 2006; Whitty, 2003). One such interpretive lens is the notion of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). “Possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future. They are different and separable from the current or now selves, yet they are intimately connected with them” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The theory of possible selves has recently received a good deal of attention in the literature on motivation in L2 learners (Dörnyei, 2009). In our interviews I have tried to explore my participant’s motivations and goals through her hopes for the future and her view of what is possible in her future.

### **Maiko’s Story**

The study abroad program was Maiko’s first opportunity to travel outside Japan. She hoped that

participation in the program would lead to improvement in her English speaking and listening skills, but she was also aware that it could lead to other changes. When asked about her expectations for the program, she said, “I want to change my life . . . I want to be aggressive . . . I’m pessimistic now, so I want to be optimistic.” She went on to explain that friends of hers, fellow-students at her university who had participated in the same study abroad program the previous year, had told her that studying abroad would help her become more assertive and less shy.

Despite her desire to learn English, Maiko had not taken advantage of opportunities to use English outside the classroom at university. She had not participated in any of the numerous extra-curricular activities that could provide chances to use English. Also, unlike several of the program participants, she had not spoken to any of the English-speaking study-abroad students who were at the university during her first year.

Maiko had high expectations regarding the study abroad program. Despite having not used English much outside the classroom, she had a strong desire to improve her English and also hoped to grow and change as a person. However, she was apprehensive about studying abroad. In response to questions posed near the end of the sojourn, she wrote that prior to going abroad, and during the first few days of the program, “I think I felt more fear than enjoyment.”

Maiko’s adjustment to life at the study abroad site was particularly difficult. In her written response to questions at the end of the program, she described her feelings shortly after our arrival. “The biggest problem was communicating with native English speakers. I couldn’t understand or speak English well. The first day I came to America, I cried at night. I felt really frustrated.”

Maiko didn’t cry only at night. On the first day of the sojourn, she broke into tears in the student dining hall just after finishing dinner there. I noticed Maiko crying, but she didn’t want to talk about how she felt at that time. Later, as we walked back to the dormitory together, I asked her again why she was upset. She told me she was crying because she couldn’t say anything in English, but she didn’t give me any more details about what had prompted her tears at that moment. However, in a post-program essay she explained more about her feelings the first few days in the USA.

As soon as we arrived in America, we got on the bus for the university. When we arrived, I was very surprised to see that the university has such a big campus. Then we were introduced to the counselors and they guided us to the dormitory and then we went for dinner. I didn’t have much appetite from jet lag. Moreover, American meal was so big compared to Japanese. I had imagined about it, but I was actually overwhelmed. We didn’t know what to say to the counselors during dinner, so we were just eating. A Japanese weak point showed up when one of the counselors said, “why don’t you talk?” I felt ashamed and shocked. My tears came out when I thought I would spend these three weeks without saying anything or no change at all even if I

was looking forward to this program so much. Most people were finished eating so only a few people saw me crying, but I was embarrassed that I might have made them worried. It was too soon to cry from the first day! I wanted to blame myself. “Don’t worry, it’s natural not being able to speak at the beginning,” my friends there encouraged me and I was able to recompose myself.

However, Maiko responded to her anxieties with a determination to make the most of her time abroad and to try to use English as much as possible. She discussed her reaction in her post-program essay.

I thought about what is the good way to learn to spend these three weeks without having any wasted days. That is “we should speak English even with Japanese friends,” and I decided to carry that out from the next day. It was a little bit embarrassing at first, but my roommate spoke English with me, so I gradually didn’t feel embarrassment.

Maiko’s roommate was Ryuno and I often came across the two of them speaking English to each other, even when no native English speaker was present. Of Maiko, I noted that she was open, curious, and has a good attitude, and that she was trying hard to speak English, and talking English a lot with Ryuno.

Maiko persevered in her efforts to use English as much as possible. She spoke with me often and she continued to speak English with Ryuno, her roommate. They both told me that they spoke English when they were alone together in their dormitory room. However, despite her positive attitude, Maiko continued to feel apprehensive about using English. Interviewed one week after our arrival she said, “I’m still worried, but not so much.”

Maiko reported changes in her feelings towards learning English that she thought had occurred as a result of the study abroad program. She wrote the following in response to a question posed near the end of our stay.

I think my feelings about learning English changed. This was my first studying abroad and first trip to a foreign country. I think I felt more fear than enjoyment. But spending time with my friends and the activities there made me recognize the importance of English and how much I like English and made me think more strongly that, ‘I want to learn English more’.

After a week abroad Maiko said, “my listening skill is a little, little improved.” Asked if she thought her English had improved by the end of the three-week program, she wrote as follows.

Yes. I have used English as much as possible since I came to America. When I didn't know how to say something in English, I tried to find how to say it in English with an electronic dictionary with my friends. I was helped by them, especially Ryuno! I really appreciate her energy!

Maiko also mentioned her improvement in English in her post-program essay. "My language ability improved and I became more assertive than before at the same time."

Maiko's willingness to use English and her level of apprehension when interacting with native English speakers presented several paradoxes. On the one hand, her TOEIC score of 515 was the highest among the program participants, and in our interviews, she was able to communicate with me in English much more fluently than many of the other students. Yet, as has been previously noted, her lack of confidence in using English drove her to tears during the first week of the program. Her interview responses, writings, and behavior during the sojourn reveal these contradictions.

As described above, tears featured prominently in Maiko's first week in America. She cried in her dorm room at night, and in the dining hall after our first meal there. She was disappointed to discover how little she understood the English being spoken around her and frustrated by the difficulty she had in saying anything at all in English. She mentioned on several occasions her worries about the program and about using English. In an interview, she described herself as "very worried" the first few days in America, and prior to the homestay she was nervous. "I worried about my English skill. I feel I . . . can't speak . . . English so much."

Maiko was also perceptive about extra-linguistic factors involved in communication. In an interview shortly after our arrival, she explained that when she first tried to speak to the counselors she had difficulty communicating. She said, "at first I couldn't talk so much." She went on to say that it had become easier to talk to the counselors once she had got to know them better. She said, "recently I found I know their character . . . I like to . . . I want to talk to them more than before." She also noticed that sharing activities together was an aid to communicating. Again, in our interview she said that she after the first week she was less worried about talking to the counselors and she explained this change by saying, "I enjoy . . . enjoy activity with them." She also reported this same dynamic at work during her homestay. She said that she had a lot of trouble understanding her host family, but she felt more comfortable communicating with them when they were engaged in some activity together. She mentioned baking cookies together as an example of an activity that put her at ease and enabled her to feel that she was making a contribution to the communication with her host family. Finally, in her post-program essay, Maiko reiterated the notion that participating in activities together can lead to increased communication, even when the activity itself is not something that one might usually enjoy. She wrote, "Rock climbing and canoeing were valuable experiences. I usually don't like to move around so much, but I tried to participate so that I was able to be friendly, I think." She also said, "I try to enjoy . . . I don't like sports . . .

but I shouldn't do things alone. I should join the group.”

Maiko was interested in learning about American culture and on occasion commented on differences between her preconceived notions about America and Americans, and the reality of what she encountered during the program. One incident in the dining hall made a strong impression on her. As Maiko later explained to me, one reason for her crying in the dining hall was her failed attempt to communicate with one of the student dining hall employees. Maiko said something to a male employee, but he didn't respond to her. At the time it happened Maiko took this to mean that she was incapable of communicating in English, and her response was to cry. However, when I interviewed her several days later she had reinterpreted the meaning of this experience. Now she felt that her preconceptions concerning the American character had been mistaken. When I asked her whether anything was different about the people she had met, compared to her image of Americans prior to the program, she told the story of the dining hall employee. She said, “ at first they are all, friendly, kind, positive, I thought . . . in the dining hall I spoke to a boy . . . who works in the dining kitchen . . . I asked him something . . . he didn't say anything . . . I was very sad.” At this point in Maiko's story I realized that this may have been a reason for her tears after dinner, I told her that I remembered what had happened that evening, and she went on to say, “I thought American is all friendly . . . but some American is . . . cool.”

Spending time with her homestay family also gave Maiko new insights into American culture. She described her experiences in her post-program essay.

There were four people in my home stay family including a 16 year-old girl and 13 year-old boy. I was nervous about many things until I met my home stay family, but I felt relief after meeting them. All of them looked very friendly. I was surprised how the house and the yard were so spacious. I thought schools and houses in America are all American size. I was worried if I was served the same kind of greasy, large portions of food like the food at the university dining hall, but it was just the right amount for me. It seemed like not all Americans were big eaters. The most surprising thing was that I was served white rice for breakfast and they were eating it with chopsticks. I found out they had lived in China twice for four months each time. There were many Chinese dolls, china, Chinese and Japanese tea at home. I never thought I could drink tea in America, so I was happy.

Maiko's comments on Americans and American culture reveal her to be a perceptive observer and analyst of her own experiences. She was articulate in describing what she saw as the difficulties in communicating in English with native speakers, and she recognized factors, for example increased familiarity with the counselors as individuals and opportunities to share activities with her host family, that enabled her to communicate more successfully. She was also able to look more deeply into the nature of

her interactions with people she met during the sojourn and thereby to reevaluate and refine her preconceived notions concerning American culture and values.

In response to a written question given at the end of the program, Maiko discussed her plans for future study. “First, I will study English vocabulary and grammar more. I want to speak English more, so I will try to speak English more back at university in Japan.”

I spoke with Maiko two years after the study abroad program and shortly before her graduation from university. She told me that she thought she had worked somewhat harder at learning English following her trip to America, but that she hadn’t studied as much as she had hoped. She also spoke about her relationship with people she had met on the program and about her plans for the future. She said that she had kept in touch with the counselors and her host family for about a year after the program, but hadn’t had any contact with them recently. She hadn’t been back to the United States, or to any English speaking country, but she had taken a trip to Korea. She said she was still close to two fellow program participants. She was looking forward to graduation and she had found a job at a large retail store.

Maiko appeared to have benefitted from her experience in the study abroad program. She gained insight into her own learning process and she may have been motivated to study more than she would have had she not participated in the program. She also had a chance to develop a relationship with some of the people she met as a program participant. However, it also appeared that as time passed the study abroad experience faded in importance compared to other priorities in her life. She lost contact with the American counselors, she didn’t have any immediate plans to continue learning English after graduation from university, and her job after graduation did not entail use of English.

### Discussion

Some recent research on study abroad has focused on the learner’s second language identity. Benson et al defined the concept of second language identity as follows. “Research on second language identity explores the ways in which learning a new language changes the learner as a person. This is in contrast to approaches that emphasize the acquisition and accumulation of language knowledge and skills. Knowing a second language influences both the learner’s sense of self and the possibilities for self-representation through language use” (2013). Benson went on to delineate three dimensions of second language identity: identity related second language competence, linguistic self-concept, and second-language mediated personal competence. These constructs will be used to analyze Maiko’s experiences in the study abroad program.

Identity related second language competence includes a learner’s expectations for study abroad, opportunities for communication with English speakers, strategies that the learner uses to communicate, challenges faced by the learner, and the development of sociopragmatic competence (Benson et al,

2013). Maiko expected to both improve her English skills and to grow as a person. Her fellow-students at university in Japan had told her that participation in the program would contribute to the accomplishment of both goals. In particular, Maiko hoped to become more assertive. Yet, despite these positive expectations, Maiko was also rather worried about studying abroad. However, as she reported, Maiko was able to overcome her apprehension and by the end of the sojourn she felt that she had had a positive experience. Maiko's behavior and responses to questions also showed development of sociopragmatic competence during the course of the program. She was aware that her cultivation of friendship with the counselors enhanced her ability to communicate with them in English. She also understood the value of participating in activities that provided opportunities for interaction with others and for language use, such as baking cookies with her homestay family, and taking part in sports activities with other students on campus.

Linguistic self-concept refers to beliefs about learning and using English as a second language, self-perceptions as English learners and users, and changes in attitudes, emotions, and perceptions as a result of study abroad (Benson et al, 2013). In Maiko's case, her anxieties about speaking English led to a determination to try to use the language as much as possible during the sojourn. I observed the results of that determination in her interactions with the teachers, counselors, and American students that she met on campus during the program. Maiko also made an effort to use English with the other Japanese program participants. Maiko also clearly felt that her beliefs about learning and using English had changed as a result of her participation in the program. She said that she recognized the importance of learning English and that she wanted to learn more. After returning to Japan she outlined her plans for changing her approach to learning English and she said that would try to speak English more at university in Japan.

Second-language-mediated personal competence entails development in personal independence, intercultural competence, and academic competence, and the role of English use in these developments (Benson et al, 2013). One of Maiko's conscious goals regarding the program was to become more positive-minded or more assertive. She showed awareness of the importance of developing personal independence and by the end of the program she felt that she had gone a little way towards achieving this goal. She also demonstrated increased intercultural competence, as evidenced by her comments regarding her homestay family and other encounters that she experienced at the study abroad site.



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