Identity development through study abroad experiences: Storied accounts

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Abstract

This study investigated three Japanese L2 learners who joined a government-funded, short-term study abroad program in the USA during their first year of college. Four years after the program, we interviewed the learners about their overseas experiences. We also asked what they had done during their university years after the program. We then analyzed their accounts to explore participants' linguistic and personal growth during and after the program. Their stories offered important insights into what short-term study abroad programs should provide: critical experiences that participants embrace through meeting and communicating with new people in L2s for the purpose of mutual understanding. When participants perceived their experiences to be successful and valuable and felt a desire to become a more efficient L2 user, they took actions to improve their L2 skills in relation to other life goals *after* returning home. Furthermore, their L2 identities are likely interwoven with their current and aspiring personal identities. As such, their stories are self-development trajectories and evidence of L2-learning-mediated personal growth through social interaction. We propose that short-term study programs: (a) avoid an exclusive focus on L2 learning on-site, (b) include ample opportunities of meaningful social interaction, and (c) target first-year students.

Keywords: study abroad; perception of successful L2 communication; L2 identity; narrative

1. Introduction

Study abroad has been researched primarily in terms of language and intercultural gains as well as in foreign-language socialization (DuFon & Churchill, 2006; Freed, 1995; Kinginger, 2009, 2013). Teachers and learners alike tend to assume that firsthand exposure to the target-language speech community, in addition to intensive L2 training, provides the best opportunities for language learning. Scholars have recognized the need for investigation, and research in this field has expanded to a wide range of language features as outcome variables, which include L2 speech fluency (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004), vocabulary growth (Collentine & Freed, 2004), pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002), intercultural competence (Jackson & Oguro, 2018), and ethnocentrism (Yashima, 2010), among others. Duration of stay (Sasaki, 2011), levels of proficiency (Isabelli, 2007), learning contexts (Lafford, 2004) and other conditions, such as housing (Magnan & Back, 2007), have been linked to the above-mentioned outcomes. Thus, most of the mainstream, quantitative studies on study abroad have been product-oriented and concerned with participants' ability to develop through their study abroad experiences and assessment upon program completion.

Past studies on outcomes of study abroad have produced mixed results on these variables. Research on ethnocentrism of study abroad participants, for example, has produced seemingly contradictory results. Yashima (2010) investigated Japanese university students who joined international volunteer programs for two to three weeks and reported that they had demonstrated a significant decrease in ethnocentrism, while participants of a longer-term program in Neff, Apple, Aliponga, and Hood (2018) did not. Yashima's participants were grouped with other volunteers from different countries and worked in a variety of areas such as human services, cultural events, and construction. Participants in more conventional study abroad programs, such as those reported by Neff and his colleagues, were unlikely to have experienced these types of activities. Furthermore, Isabelli-García (2006) reported a difference in outcomes among participants in the same program, depending on individual motivation in L2 learning and attitudes toward the new cultures. Thorough examination of participants' study abroad experiences – including perceptions, interpretations, reflections, and evaluations – is needed to examine learning outcomes, assess existing programs, and enhance future study abroad programs.

In social psychology, the effects of intercultural contact have long been researched in relation to conditions for achieving optimal contact such as equal status between different groups, shared goals, need for cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, Clark, & Pettigrew, 1954). More recently, it has been found that the ways people perceive and evaluate such contact make a significant,

favorable difference in ethnic prejudice (van Dick, Wagner, Pettigrew, Christ, Petzel, Castro, & Jackson, 2004). When people find it important and meaningful to meet people from other cultures, they perceive the contact as valuable and become less biased and friendlier. However, we do not know whether this effect is enduring and stable after the contact phase is over.

Investigation on changes in participants' attitudes and behaviors after returning from abroad has been scarce. Sasaki (2011), who conducted one of the few studies, explored writing-skill improvement of study abroad participants and at-home learners. One of the most intriguing findings of her vigorous longitudinal study was that those participants who spent more than eight months abroad, compared to those who stayed for shorter durations, voluntarily practiced writing after they returned home, which contributed significantly to their writing skill improvement. Although Sasaki related the length of stay to different learners' behaviors after their experiences abroad, other conditions might contribute to behavioral differences. For the purpose of exploring the factors that inspire study abroad participants to take subsequent action for change, it is imperative to investigate participants' storied experiences to "elucidate what actually transpires on stays abroad" (Jackson, 2013, p. 5429).

Furthermore, some teachers and researchers believe that an overall goal of study abroad is personal development (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013). We also take the position that "learning a new language changes the learner as a person" (Benson et al., 2013, p. 1), and that L2 knowledge and use affect learners' understanding of themselves. In fact, over their course of their lives, people are perpetually constructing and reconstructing their identities. Identities are not invariant and stable, but fluid, continuously transformed, and multifaceted. Although some parts of identity are dispositional, others parts are contested, changed, and developed, particularly when individuals face critical experiences. Study abroad most likely provides such opportunities and, as such, it has a profound significance on individual identity development (Benson et al., 2013; Steinwidder, 2016).

Identity construction is an individual endeavor, but it is inevitably situated in contexts and therefore embedded in social scenarios. Participants of study abroad undergo self-presentational challenges (Leary & Kowalski, 1995) with an L2 in unfamiliar cultures. They are concerned with their self-presentation and how people recognize and perceive them in the different culture. Successful self-presentation helps participants build confidence, accelerate development, nurture new identities, and become oriented toward the future (Benson et al., 2013), while self-presentational failure may induce anxiety (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017; Guiora, 1984; Kimura, 2017b), destabilize the present identity, and inhibit favorable development.

We conducted an exploratory case study to investigate how study abroad experiences could contribute to participants' L2-learning-mediated personal growth and identity development. Considering the increasing popularity of short-term study abroad programs in Japan (Japan Student Services Organization, 2017), the potential long-term value of such programs should be examined in a local context. We examined: (a) some of the inspiring, critical experiences that made three study abroad participants think about future L2 learning plans and what they might consider doing after the program, and (b) actions they took upon returning home to explore how crossing geographical, socio-cultural, and psychological borders helped them grow as L2 learners and individuals.

This study is part of a larger ongoing longitudinal investigation of a group of 23 participants in a government-funded, short-term study abroad program. Although a detailed account of the program is found elsewhere (Hayashi, Kimura, Kumagai, Morris, & Tashima, 2014; Kimura, 2017a; Kimura & Hayashi, 2017), a brief background description is provided in the following methodology section.

2. Methodology

2.1. Program

The study abroad program was a 2-week fully funded exchange program between Japan and North America, called the KAKEHASHI project. The period of stay was ten days and thus it was a mini-program, as defined by Spencer and Tuma (2018). Twenty-three university students of different majors and year groups and two escorts took part in the November 2013 program. The overall program objective was to promote a global understanding of Japan and to nurture a mutual understanding between Japan and the USA for future friendship and cooperation. The official mission was to specifically disseminate information about Japan and its attractive points from the participants' own perspectives. In three US cities, the participants were engaged in formal and informal face-to-face interactions with such people as local and international university students, business people, diplomats, and ordinary people. In formal settings, the student participants were grouped into four teams and made presentations on distinct themes about traditional and modern Japanese culture on four different occasions to diverse groups of people. They also attended ceremonial welcoming events. In informal situations, they mingled and communicated with people from a range of socioeconomic statuses on different occasions, where they chatted spontaneously in non-controlled environments. With the exception of one 60-minute language class of international students learning Japanese as a foreign language at Stanford University – in which the student participants joined as guest native Japanese speakers – the study abroad group did not attend any language classes.

2.2. Participants

For this particular study, we chose three participants (we use pseudonyms) who joined the program as first-year students. Although there were four first-year students among the 23 program participants, we were not able to approach one of these four students at the time of our interviews. We thought the first-year students had had ample time after their return home to make good use of their study abroad experiences as they continued their university years. Miki was an English major. She extended her university education by a year to do a 1-year study abroad in Germany. She made the plan by herself, did a homestay, and learned German at a language school. Sachi was also an English major. She joined a 1-year exchange program and studied education in Ohio before moving on to graduate school back in Japan. Risako was an intercultural studies major. She extended her university education by a year to join another government-funded study abroad program in Italy for a year. She studied Italian at a language school and joined some internship programs there. All three students decided to go abroad and experienced longer and different types of study.

2.3. Data collection

All program participants were required to cooperate in any data-gathering requests in terms of the program outcomes and signed consent forms before joining the program. While our study is not directly related to the program per se, the three participants viewed our interview requests as part of this obligation and did not hesitate to meet us and share their thoughts and feelings in relation to their experiences. They gave us permission to digitally record the interviews.

We conducted open-ended, retrospective interviews with each of the three participants separately in Kimura's university office in February and March of 2017, almost four years after the program. We call our interviews open-ended because we did not plan any specific questions, and the interviews were more casual, interactional encounters than formal interviews, although we did have research agendas in mind. Interviews were conducted in Japanese. At the time of the interviews, the students were all 23 years old. Miki and Risako were interviewed shortly before graduation and Sachi was almost finished with her first year of graduate study.

Kimura interviewed Miki and Sachi alone, and Kimura and Hayashi interviewed Risako together. Each interview was about an hour long. We, as interviewers, asked the participants to read the 1-page essays they had each submitted to the program organizer immediately after returning from the KAKEHASHI program. We used each essay to begin the interview so that they could recall their program experiences. After chatting briefly about their essays, we asked a

regular introductory question, "Can you tell me (us) some of your experiences of the KAKEHASHI program?" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We also asked them to share what they did after the program.

2.4. Researchers' participation

We participated in the study abroad program as escorts and we were part of the tour group. We not only observed their presentations and gave feedback on-site or at subsequent meetings, but we worked together with the students to build a good team and complete the mission. Most importantly, we spent the whole time together and experienced the program along with the students, traveling long distances to visit three cities in the US in ten days.

During the interviews, the participants sometimes talked *to* us and at other times talked *with* us, depending on the different degrees of our involvement in the storytelling or how interactive the interviews turned out to be (Ochs & Capps, 2001). The degrees of involvement changed mostly according to how much we interviewers were familiar with the particular episode being recounted. Active interviewer involvement naturally happened for two main reasons. First, research interview events, unless they are carefully planned and strictly structured, are generally co-constructed on-site between interviewers and interviewees (Barkhuizen, 2011). Second, as we had been program escorts, we naturally shared many of the participants' experiences. We were also teachers at their school. Sachi took Kimura's TESOL seminar and Risako took Hayashi's teaching methods courses. Our different identities as researchers, interviewers, former program escorts, and teachers were likely to impact how interview events were managed and negotiated (De Fina, 2011), as well as our analyses and interpretation of the data. Such was our involvement that we would refer to what we observed about the program and the participants during and after the program in discussing the results.

2.5. Analysis

We asked the three participants to recall their experiences (cf. life reality in Pavlenko, 2007), or more appropriately, their adventures both during and after the program. They revisited and reflected on their past and narrated stories (cf. subject reality in Pavlenko, 2007). While they were narrating their stories, as we recall, we started interpreting or co-constructing their stories with them, which is known as "narrative knowledging." Narrative knowledging refers to "meaning making, learning, and knowledge construction that takes place at all stages of a narrative research project" (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395).

The narrative knowledging process was also quite active when we mentally reconstructed their orally narrated stories and put them into writing as a coherent whole (cf. text reality in Pavlenko, 2007). We did not transcribe the interviews or ask participants to write their own stories, out of concern that they might use different writing styles, such as formal versus informal, which could cause problems in our analyses. In writing up the participants' stories, we sought to interpret and understand their experiences to produce coherent stories. We repeated the process of listening to the recorded interviews and writing (or revising) drafts before finalizing the stories. It was a process of determining if our interpretation was systematic, dependable, and meaningful (Brown, 2014). We then asked the participants to verify their stories. This whole process, which was integral to a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, gave shape to the final stories.

3. Stories

3.1. Miki's story

I chose English as my major even though I was not confident about my English ability. Even after I started school, I was not active in seeking opportunities to meet foreign people. I sensed a barrier between Japan and the outside world and thus I kept a distance from foreign people. I realize now that I was the one that built a barrier where there was none.

During the KAKEHASHI tour in 2013, I was a member of the group whose presentation theme was the 3.11 earthquake disaster. I was thrilled to be sharing first-hand experiences with people in the US. We were lucky because we had an attentive audience every place we presented – at universities and at local community centers. I felt happy knowing that many foreign students were learning Japanese and going through difficulties in learning the language, just as we had our difficulties with learning English. It was also a good experience to work with fellow and senior Japanese students who were sharing the same objectives for the tour. I felt as though the older students in my school were my role models. Some of the tour participants enjoyed a reunion with American college students who had previously visited our school as part of another KAKEHASHI exchange tour. Our 10-day tour to the US made me realize that foreign countries are "just around the corner, not beyond our reach," and that foreign people are our neighbors.

After I came back, I began seeking opportunities to meet foreign people and became active in international exchange events. The most important decision I made was to take a 1-year leave from school to go to Germany and learn the language. I made the plan by myself. Although it was a challenge, I wanted an opportunity to learn another foreign language because I felt that I had not

done anything significant or special during my university years. I thought that my university years were the only time that I could have the freedom to do what I really desire. I wanted to exercise that freedom and make use of the time available. At first, my father did not support my plan. As a traditional father, he decides everything for our family, and I knew it would be difficult to gain his support. He had good reasons for not giving me quick approval, considering the considerable cost, the postponement of my graduation due to the extension of my time at university, and the difficulty in learning a new target language. I took every measure to persuade him, strategically revising my original plan and presenting details of all the possible costs and benefits. I argued that learning another language in addition to English and becoming functional in more than one foreign language is the "way to go." Looking back, I feel that I have never been as assertive or strategic in my life. After a series of presentations and negotiations, I finally succeeded in persuading him – my father gave me the "go ahead." I think he purposely challenged me because he wanted to make sure that I was serious. In fact, we became closer after this confrontation.

In Germany, I did a homestay while learning German at a language school. I came to appreciate various aspects of German culture. For example, German people value their private lives – in particular, time spent with their family and friends. Also, it is common for a German mother and son to have their shoulders touching while sitting on a sofa and watching television. German daughters say quite openly, "I love my father." For Japanese parents, earning money to support their families financially is of primary importance. We often hear fathers making statements such as, "I'm too busy to spend time with my family." We do not hear teenagers say, "I love my father/mother." Although these differences might be simply cultural, I do respect German people who treasure their family life and family relationships. While in Germany, I also realized that Japanese people are great. They are punctual and abide by rules, and they have good manners. I took these things for granted because I had lived in Japan for about 20 years and never knew what it was like to live outside of the country.

After I graduate, I will obtain a job as an airline cabin attendant. Rather than engaging in paperwork all day, I would prefer to work in the service industry, as I enjoy meeting and communicating with people. Japan is known for its hospitality, *omotenashi*. Working as a cabin attendant would give me a great opportunity to acquire the skills and know-how to be respectful and hospitable in welcoming guests. However, working for an airline is not my final goal.

I would like to live and work in Germany at some point in the future, and I hope my cabin attendant experience will be helpful in obtaining a job. Although I believe that interpersonal skills, such as hospitality, are versatile and universal to some extent, I need to remain open-minded and flexible in order to adjust to

cultural differences. There are many Japanese communities in Germany. In Dusseldorf, for example, there are Japanese schools, facilities, and shops. I have certificates for teaching English to junior and senior high school students and for managing school libraries. I may try to find a teaching job or another job at a school. I suspect that if I had not participated in the KAKEHASHI project, I would not have tried the 1-year study abroad in Germany and most likely I would not have taken action.

3.2. Sachi's story

The KAKEHASHI experience helped to change my perspectives on life. While participating in the KAKEHASHI project, we made presentations on traditional and contemporary Japanese culture including school cultures, as well as on the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. The audience was able to understand what we were trying to convey in English, and the fact that we were successful was an unforgettable experience. We interacted not only with university students, but also with local people. What I remember most from the project was the face-to-face interactions with local people – or "ordinary people" – who are, say, in lower socio-economic groups. I am ashamed to admit this, but I was quite prejudiced about these kinds of people before the actual person-to-person interactions. I had a skewed view that such people were "scary." However, I discovered that I was completely wrong. The local people we met at community centers were friendly and compassionate. They were attentive listeners at our presentations, showed genuine interest in what we had to share, and made us believe that we were successful communicators. They also made me realize that I should be mindful about the prejudices I might unconsciously possess. I would not have been able to meet these people if I had not taken part in the KAKEHASHI program. The overseas experience, I believe, helped me to become more open-minded and appreciative of diversity.

Even before the KAKEHASHI project, I had been thinking of joining a longer study abroad program during my university years, but the 10-day experience firmly pushed me into participating. I wanted to learn firsthand about people in the outside world and get into "their ways of living." This became my desire.

At university, before the KAKEHASHI trip, I was aloof and admittedly a bit arrogant. I failed the university entrance examination of my choice. My school was not where I wanted to be. After matriculation, I was not happy about my school life or the other students in my department. I was not able to respect them because they did not seem attractive to me. But through the experiences I gained from KAKEHASHI and the 1-year exchange study abroad program in Ohio I later joined, I came to enjoy communication with people of different backgrounds and views. I learned that diversity exists even among Japanese students

in the same department of the same university. Some may not score as high in academics, but they are full of ideas that would not occur to me. They are also serious about the world they live in and their own future careers. Let's stop being irritable and unappreciative of them, I told myself. I then began to interact with a variety of people and have enjoyable talks with other students in my department. I also made friends with students of other majors in my school.

During the 1-year program in Ohio, I was in ESL classes during the first semester, and I attended regular classes in the second semester. I was the only international student in the discussion class. I was given a heavy reading assignment and naturally I had to express myself in English class. Through the course, I discovered that the higher my own self-expectations, the more I learned. When I did not feel confident about myself and made compromises, it was obvious and eventually made me unhappy. When I believed I could do something, I was capable of doing it. We should not set limits on what we can do.

The negative effect of setting limits is not just about myself – it is also about education in general. Besides attending classes and visiting local schools for observation, I also helped two Japanese students in the community to learn English. One of them was a boy about ten years of age. I thought he was very smart, but his mother would often scold him by saying: "Why can't you do this?" Having high expectations does not mean pointing out what you cannot do and reinforcing negative feelings. Instead, I believe, high expectations represent a belief about what one will be able to do in the future. When I told his mother he would do fine, she started to cry. It looked as if she wanted to believe in him, but could not for some reason. I think she was caught or trapped in what her boy should be able to do "now." Despite her good intentions, she was unknowingly setting limits on her son and herself.

With this and other experiences, I learned to think deeper. I used to avoid careful thinking on any subject and I was happy that way; however, I realized that this was the wrong attitude. Thinking deeply opens up new ways of looking at things.

I am studying learner-centered approaches to language teaching at graduate school now. Before I became a graduate student, I had a choice: teaching English at a private language school or studying education in a graduate program. While I was deciding, my mother suggested that I should go to graduate school before obtaining a job, because learning is "now or never." I'm glad I followed her suggestion. When I was an undergraduate doing student teaching, I was more concerned about my teaching. I worried about how my teaching was going and how much fun students were having in my classes. I now know it is more important that students learn, which helps them determine what they will do in the future. Teachers (as well as parents) need vision and patience. I appreciate what I am learning at school now.

3.3. Risako's story

I joined KAKEHASHI when I was deciding how to spend my university years. Toward the end of the program, one of the local escorts in his late thirties told all of us: "Where there is no bridge, we will build one." I thought that was exactly what he and the other program escorts were doing. I have kept that phrase in mind ever since.

I had been interested in Italy since I was a high school student. Back then, I read a comic book written by Kimidori Inoue (Inoue, 2009). She had visited Italy, Bulgaria, Indonesia, and Los Angeles and investigated people's dietary habits and the kinds of food people ate in those places. A book on her experiences and investigations was published, and of all the places mentioned, I became most interested in Italy.

At my school, I majored in intercultural studies. My school is one of the two schools in Tohoku that provides Italian language courses, so I was lucky to be able to start learning Italian as my second foreign language. During the KAKEHASHI program, I was impressed to see that the older students from my school were actually "using English" spontaneously. They were not just reciting from memory, but talking to their audience and communicating with people. They're cool and I'd like to be like them, I thought. To become an Italian language user, I would have to study in the country where the language is used and immerse myself in the culture. Otherwise, it would be impossible to become fluent, as language and culture are inseparable.

My group's topic for our presentation was the "Japanese mind." We introduced the tea ceremony, flower arranging, and traditional folk songs – all part of our Japanese cultural heritage. In planning the presentation, I thought deeply about my own culture and what defines culture. I was also able to work with other team members to create our unique presentation. It was a good experience to plan both the kind of introduction presentation and how to accomplish it. We spent long hours together before we left for the US, and we continued discussing and revising our presentation during the trip.

After KAKEHASHI, I enjoyed my school life more than ever because I had made friends with the older students and other group members during the program. In the meantime, I applied to become a member of a group of students who would visit Taiwan to thank the citizens for their support after the Great East Japan Earthquake. I was accepted for the 10-day trip and I made friends with Taiwanese students. I then went to Italy for a 1-month study abroad trip and studied the language at a local language school. I also took part in an Italian speech contest and received fourth place. I applied to the Tobitate program, another government-funded program for young people. I was accepted and placed in the intermediate/advanced class. While staying in Italy, I spoke the language all the time. I communicated in Italian even with other

Japanese speakers. I also joined internship programs and experienced agritourism firsthand. I stayed in Italy for a year.

During my internship programs, I learned a valuable lesson. Japanese people think ahead about what others need and try to provide help without waiting for a request. We try to "sense" the need of others and provide support even before they ask for it. However, Italian people understand others' needs when they are reminded of them, which is a big difference in attitudes.

These differences in attitudes are found everywhere. For example, Japanese people are, in general, very punctual, while Italian people are not. Of course, there are always exceptions. Some Italian people are actually punctual (and interestingly, they love Japanese culture). When I had an appointment with these people, I tried to be on time. In other cases, I knew people tended to be late, so I did not have to worry about being late. Because punctuality depends on the other party, I learned to become more flexible.

Italian food is popular in Japan, but we do not have many tourists from Italy or Italian exchange students. Not many Japanese people speak Italian. I wanted to promote a better relationship between the two countries and make a difference, but I was unsure of how to do it.

After graduating from college, I wanted to join the Japan Foundation, an independent administrative institution established to foster mutual understanding and trusting relationships between Japan and the world through culture, language, and dialogue. In fact, the organization has a major role in the KAKE-HASHI project. One of their employees joined the tour and helped escort us in the US. Recently, I took the test to work at the institution. I passed the first stage, the writing test, but failed in the second stage, the interview. I believe that I was lacking real-life experiences. All of the other applicants who made it through the first stage looked older than I, in their late twenties. They seemed to know each other and I assumed that they had majored in Italian at university. At the time of the interview, I was still a university senior without any job experience. Although I was disappointed when I failed to get the job, I now know what I need to do in order to change (turn) my dream into reality.

I will soon obtain a job at a travel agency. At this job, I will be tasked with planning, promoting, and escorting foreign travel tours. I feel fortunate because if I worked for another travel agency, I would only be able to do one of these tasks. I'd like to experience all jobs related to organizing travel tours. With some experience at the travel agency, I will retake the test for the Japan Foundation or seek other job opportunities at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or at affiliated institutions. There should be various opportunities for me to be "a bridge for tomorrow between Japan and Italy."

4. Results

4.1. Critical experiences

At the beginning of the interview, all three interviewees shared what they thought were critical experiences of joining the program and how such experiences affected their self-understanding, world-view, and outlook on life. Miki had doubts about her English skills and her motivation to learn English did not seem to be strong before joining the program. However, during her time in the US program, as a member of a group presentation, she shared responsibility with other members to complete their official mission of promoting Japan. Miki was happy to be welcomed, accepted, and understood by her audience. In this way, she gained self-confidence as an L2 user and strengthened her L2 learning motivation. She was then able to present her desired self-image, an aspect of her identity as a skillful L2 user (e.g., Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Hessel, 2015). Through such opportunities, she likely became aware of herself as someone who could pursue and achieve a goal. This self-reevaluation also made her more open-minded toward new cultures and proactive in communicating with foreign people.

Sachi failed the entrance examination of a prestigious university and was not happy or comfortable with her current school, her school life, or her friends – that is, the whole environment of her university life. She was not able to fit in socially with other students who she thought were less intelligent and uninteresting. She developed a dislike for her situation and distanced herself from other students in her department. However, interacting with socially and economically disadvantaged Americans forced her to confront her biased, judgmental, and ethnocentric attitudes. They were generous, friendly, and genuinely curious about what she had to share with them. This experience literally transformed her. She became determined to communicate with anyone who happened to be around her. Thus, the program offered her a chance to learn about the person she aspired to be.

Miki and Risako found senior members as their role models (Murphey, 1996). Both students said that their seniors had performed amazingly, expressing themselves in English and actively seeking opportunities to speak up and communicate with local people. Miki and Risako developed a desire to be like the seniors and formulated an image they wish to become as L2 learners (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

Risako also encountered a salient image of the person she aspired to be. Near the end of the program, a local escort of the tour referred to the Japanese expression *kakehashi* when he talked to all the participants. He said, "Where there is no bridge, we will build one." In English, the core meaning of the word, *bridge*, is a physical structure built over a road. Its Japanese counterpart is *hashi*. On the other hand, *kakehashi* in modern Japanese is usually a mental bridge, a go-between, or a

mediator often between two groups of people. The founders of the program had this in mind when they named the study abroad project KAKEHASHI. The concept of a mental bridge helped Risako regulate her thinking and create future visions.

4.2. Actions upon return

The three interviewees talked to us about what actions they took after they returned. All of them renewed their L2 learning motivation, made longer study abroad plans, and put their plan into practice during their university years. Besides English, Miki learned German in Germany and Risako studied Italian in Italy. These students made up their minds to be multilingual and started to accomplish this goal. Sachi combined L2 learning with academic pursuits and studied education in the US.

It was not easy for Miki to convince her father to agree to her plan for an extension of her university years and a study abroad in Germany to learn the language. She presented the plan, but her father did not immediately approve. Her father had been the decision-maker for her family, as in traditional Japanese families, so Miki had to negotiate with him. In response to her father's rejection, she critically evaluated and reformulated her plan to convince him that it was feasible and meaningful for her future career to be able to use multiple languages. It is worth noting that she actually used the word *presentation* in Japanese when confronting her father. It is a loan word, and although the core meaning stays the same as in English, the Japanese counterpart is only appropriate for tangible formal events. However, she intentionally used the word to make the event "formal" in her thinking and doing. As we understand it, *presentation* was effectively used in her storytelling to externalize the formality both Miki and her father must have internally felt. In fact, Miki made her own decision, took full responsibility for her actions, and started moving toward independence.

After attending ESL classes for a semester as an exchange student in Ohio, Sachi entered a regular university program to study education and became committed to humanistic, student-centered approaches. When she tutored a Japanese boy in the US, she helped his mother to deal with her own personal hardship – raising a child in a foreign environment. At first, Sachi did not empathize with his mother and thought she was strict and unloving. However, she eventually understood the mother's plight, made an imaginative leap into her mind, and lent her support. We understand that Sachi converted her tentative evaluation into the motivation to provide help to the boy because she felt his mother's pain and understood her vulnerability – that is, she developed empathy toward others. Sachi put into practice what she had learned from books and in class, became genuinely involved with the son and his mother at a difficult time, and tackled the situation with confidence and empathy.

Risako's actions and cognitive development after joining the project were mediated by the mental bridge metaphor, and one action led to another: a trip to Taiwan, a short study abroad in Italy, a speech contest, and participation in another government-sponsored program. It is safe to say that she established her relationship to the world through the concept of a go-between and integrated it into her mind and behavior. For example, one short snippet from Risako's story about the punctuality of Italians is intriguing, even though she spoke jokingly. Depending on the community she was currently in, Risako chose to behave in a way she considered most appropriate – that is, like Italians in general or Italians who she thought were more concerned about punctuality and loved Japanese culture. Risako made an interesting observation, which seemed to indicate her enhanced cultural sensitivity and flexibility as she herself narrated. As a go-between, she needed to be able to appreciate each different culture in its unique way. Moreover, it is also important to note that whichever behavior she chose to perform, the goal was the same: maintaining good social relationships. This is a good example of learning as problem-solving in social settings.

To recap, all three participants made the most of their KAKEHASHI experiences, developed new enthusiasm for overseas study, made their own choices, and experienced longer-term, deeper immersion in the target language cultures. Each story was unique, but successful experiences of the short-term program led to stronger L2 learning motivation, a clearer purpose of L2 learning, and firmer determination and desire to learn even more.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we shared three stories by short-term study abroad program participants about their L2-learning-mediated personal growth. A very short stay abroad like the KAKEHASHI project can create valuable opportunities for learning and growth when participants experience meeting and communicating with local people and establish emotional bonds through reciprocal appreciation. The participants presented themselves primarily not as L2 learners of English but as L2 users who went to the US to enhance the local community's understanding of Japan and to seek a deeper mutual understanding. Their goals were more than personal since the participants had an official mission to represent Japanese youth. This particular context created a concrete responsibility and greatly mattered in setting the stage for purposeful L2 communication. The program offered grassroots opportunities to achieve its objectives. The participants embraced the opportunities and felt that they had successfully completed their mission.

This success would not have happened, however, if the participants had not been accepted and welcomed by the local people. Acceptance in the new

L2 environment is crucial in order for study abroad participants to learn and grow (Benson et al., 2013). It was fortunate that the KAKEHASHI participants had attentive, compassionate audiences. At one of the community centers, an informal gathering after the official presentation lasted longer than it was scheduled. At Stanford, after a language class had officially ended, local students voluntarily joined a campus tour and lunch at the student cafeteria. Success of study abroad programs depends upon the willingness of local hosts to stay, talk, and work with the study abroad participants, whose learning and growth are situated in the L2 contexts and mediated by using the L2s (e.g., Lantolf, 2000).

Although the focus of the program was not L2 learning, all three participants became motivated to learn different L2s and seemed to develop L2 skills after returning home. Miki decided to learn German and acquired a sufficient command of the language for everyday exchanges. Sachi studied education in a regular undergraduate program and tutored in the US. Risako did an internship to learn agritourism and attained a level of Italian that matched foreign language university graduates. Their achievements suggest that L2 learning can continue after a short stay if learners are inspired during the program and undertake some meaningful actions in relation to L2 learning on their own after returning from the program. We think that the three participants understood the power of L2 knowledge in intercultural communication and developed curiosity toward other cultures and people. Miki believed that becoming functional in more than one foreign language was the "way to go." Sachi described her motive as getting into "their ways of living." Risako mentioned the significance of immersing herself in the different cultures. Our interpretation was that the study abroad experiences initiated the participants' desire to cross geographical, linguistic, and cultural borders.

As we have observed, each participant's "whole person" learning and growth were situated in L2 contexts and mediated by learning and using L2s. As such, we suspect their L2 abilities and life skills have been developing in tandem, although the relationship between language and personal goals can be complex and even mosaic. Through their endeavors, Miki became more independent and nurtured negotiating, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Sachi became more self-aware and learned empathy. Risako developed social skills and became more committed to making friends and fostering friendships with people in another culture. While they were working on and acquiring these life skills, their L2 knowledge and skills helped them to explore and expand their current and aspirational identities.

A way to describe participants' linguistic and personal development is that they nurtured multicompetence (Cook, 2013). Multicompetence is defined as "the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or in the same community" and it "involves the whole mind of the speaker" (Cook, 2013, p.

3769). Examples included Miki appreciating the distinct parent-child relationships between Germany and Japan, Sachi performing as a caring educator in a multicultural context, and Risako becoming more flexible between practices of two communities in terms of strictness or leniency in regards to punctuality. Multicompetence definitely goes beyond linguistic abilities.

One contrast this study makes with past studies is that Miki and Risako thought highly of their fellow program participants – co-nationals – as role models (Murphey, 1996) and valued their presence. They saw older students and fellow members performing successfully as L2 communicators in real situations and recognized ideal images of skilled L2 users. Moreover, after returning home, Risako started enjoying her school life more thanks to fellow participants in the same program, while Sachi appreciated the presence of different types of students in her department and school. In contrast, Coleman (2013), for example, conducted an extensive literature review on the negative influences of fellow participants or same nationals in the same program and pointed out a frequent finding: Socializing with the same L1 speakers without mixing and mingling with speakers of other L1s or locals posed an obstacle in producing expected outcomes. We can only speculate the reasons for the different views on peers in the KAKEHASHI program. Members were on the road together during the program, developed close relationships, and came to see each other not as other L2 learners, but as thinking and feeling fellow human beings, which contributed to a deeper mutual understanding and respect.

This exploratory study has three implications for future study abroad programs. First, short-term programs do not have to focus on L2 learning; with some inspirational experiences, L2 learning can happen later. Second, the programs need to provide purposeful opportunities for communication with local, supportive people and for authentic communicative purposes beyond practice and exposure. In this way, participants can become actively engaged and communicate through meaningful activities with people both in and outside the program. Third, it may be a good idea for short-term, study abroad programs to target first-year students, who have ample time to make use of the experience in their university years. However, this does not mean that short-term programs like the KAKEHASHI project are not feasible for older students. The effects of such programs may appear later in life after deep reflection and other life experiences.

There are two major shortcomings of this study. First, we were not able to receive feedback from one of the participants about the stories we wrote in time for publication. Second, we had to compromise in combining both the participants' stories and our analyses in one paper. We had a choice between shortening the stories or our analyses, and we decided to publish their stories as told to us and keep the analyses short. Although it is unusual to publish whole stories

in one journal article, the last phase of narrative knowledging is for the reader to interpret the text reality (Barkhuizen, 2011; Pavlenko, 2007), and as such, the decision to have stories speak for themselves was a matter of priority.

For further studies, we propose two lines of research. First, study abroad experiences need to be explored in relation to a variety of affective variables, as studies on L2 learning in general have started to cover different kinds of affect (Dewaele, Petrides, & Furnham, 2008; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Second, in this time of globalization, Japanese learners of L2s who experience intercultural contacts in domestic contexts – not just through study abroad – should also be investigated, such as the study by Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh (2006) with regard to Hungarian learners.

To conclude, although the stay was short, the three participants appreciated joining the program, perceived it as a life-changing event, and made use of their program experiences. In their stories, they shared experiences they perceived as critical. The official program goal played a crucial role in communicating with locals for reciprocal understanding, and the participants' perceived success of intercultural contact helped generate stronger motivation and desire to learn L2s and become better people. In fact, upon returning home, the three learners all sought another, longer study abroad for immersion in another culture and their future career paths. We believe that the study abroad experiences, as well as on-site and subsequent L2 learning and usage, mediated their personal identity development.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the life trajectory of three L2 learners who had participated in a short-term study abroad program four years ago. We focused on their experiences during the program, lessons they gleaned as direct results, and the actions they took upon their return to Japan. We analyzed the learners' storied accounts and found that their communication in an L2 with local people for reciprocal understanding and perceptions of successful intercultural contact led the learners to further inquiry, adventures, and last but not least, L2 learning. Local hosts, fellow participants, and program escorts all inspired the three participants and helped them to cross borders. The significance of others in providing opportunities for identity development should not be downplayed in any context.

Acknowledgements

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