

Articles

Gender and Language Learning at Home and Abroad¹

Eton Churchill

Kanagawa University

This case study investigates the language learning experiences, both at home and abroad, of a male Japanese high school learner of English. The qualitative data consist of field notes taken in Japan and the United States, interview data, and a semi-structured diary. Proficiency data include an oral proficiency interview (OPI), an institutional TOEFL, a dictation, and a narrative recorded immediately following the study abroad experience. By examining dynamics at different levels of analysis, it is argued that gender played a significant role in shaping short-term and long-term language learning opportunities and outcomes. This case study contributes to the study abroad literature in two ways. First, it adds a case study of a Japanese male to the literature on the gendered experience abroad. Secondly, it allows us to investigate how language study at home and abroad differs for a single learner, and how gender contributes to these differences.

本研究は、一人の日本人男子高校生の日本とアメリカにおける英語学習経験を調査したケーススタディである。日米両国で記録したフィールドノート、インタビュー、記載様式をある程度規定した日記などの質的データを資料とした。習熟度に関する資料としては、OPI と呼ばれる会話測定能力テスト、TOEFL、ディクテーション、留学経験直後に録音した体験談などを使用した。多様なレベルのダイナミクスを検証し、ジェンダーが、短期・長期両方にわたる言語学習の機会と成果を得るために、重要な役割を果たしていることを論じた。本研究は、日本人男性のケーススタディである点、個人においても母国と外国とでは言語学習の方法が異なり、ジェンダーがその違いにどのように影響しているかを探ることができた点において、海外留学体験におけるジェンダーの影響を扱った研究分野に貢献するものである。

In examining the study abroad literature through the lens of gender, one does not have to look very far before finding evidence of a disparity of experiences and outcomes. Studies focusing on females have noted how their experience can be negatively influenced at the macro-level by factors at home (internationalization) and forces of globalization (Habu, 2000), at the program level in terms of host placements (Churchill, 2003a; Churchill, 2003b; Kinoshita, 2001; Rivers, 1998), and at the micro-level through gender related incidents or perceived sexual harassment (Pellegrino, 1998; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Polanyi, 1995; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Twombly, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998). Turning to proficiency gains, large-scale studies on American learners (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1995; Carlson, Burn, Unseem, & Yachimowicz, 1990) have found that males make greater gains in oral proficiency. As suggested by Isabelli-Garcia (2003, 2004, 2006), this may be in part because when it comes to creating social networks facilitative to language learning, host contexts respond to learners and learners engage with the study abroad milieu in ways that tend to be most beneficial to males. Isabelli-Garcia's findings are supported by several case studies of males in study abroad contexts (Hassell, 2006; Schmidt, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

While it is largely recognized that gender plays a role in mediating the experiences of language learners, gender is seldom treated as an intervening variable when examining linguistic development as a result of time spent overseas (although see Brecht et al., 1995; Carlson et al., 1990). For example, in a special issue of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (Collentine & Freed, 2004) focusing on study abroad, Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey (2004) reported that the immersion program learners in their study outperformed the study abroad group, and that both of these groups showed greater gains than the at-home group. However, gender may have been an intervening variable as there were more females in the immersion and study abroad groups (8 out of 12, and 7 out of 8 participants respectively) and more males in the at-home group (5 out of 8 participants). In defense of Freed and her colleagues, the small numbers in their study did not permit a statistical comparison based on gender. However, the question of how gender affects learning outcomes differently at home and abroad begs to be addressed.

As an initial attempt to answer this question, the present study investigates the language learning experiences of Hiro, a male Japanese high school learner of English. Through an examination of dynamics at different levels of analysis, I suggest that factors at the macro-, program, and micro-level had

gender-specific consequences for both short-term and long-term language learning opportunities and outcomes. This case study contributes to the study abroad literature in two ways. First, it adds a study of a Japanese male to the literature on the gendered experience abroad. Secondly, it allows us to investigate how language study at home and abroad differs for a single learner, and how gender contributes to these differences.

Theoretical Framework and Data Collection

Theoretically, I draw on Ehrlich's (1997) work on gender as a social practice and hence adopt a social constructivist perspective. Namely, at the macro-level, we need to be attentive to the social, cultural, and economic forces that contribute to the shaping of gender-related language learning experiences. At the micro-level, gender is locally constructed and constituted within the social practices of communities (Ehrlich, p. 435). Gender also influences and is shaped by the positionings that learners negotiate within these communities. Finally, since it is increasingly clear that individual speech patterns are an outcome of participation in social practices (Freed, 1996), it follows that "the various ways that gender gets constructed and constituted in terms of a community's social practices results in varying acquisition outcomes" (Ehrlich, p. 435).

The data for this study, part of a larger study (Churchill, 2003a), were collected prior to, during, and following Hiro's one-month study abroad in the Eastern United States in the fall of 1999. The qualitative data consist of field notes taken in Japan and the United States, interview data, a semi-structured diary kept by Hiro, and course assignments leading up to and following the short-term exchange. In Japan, I was Hiro's homeroom and classroom teacher, and thus came into contact with him on a daily basis for 3 years. As a chaperone on the study abroad program, I was assigned to the same school as Hiro, met with him daily during his stay, and had informal conversations with his host mother, host brother, teachers, and campus friends. Proficiency data for the study include a school-administered oral proficiency interview (OPI) and an institutional TOEFL, both given a year and a half prior to and a year following the study abroad experience, a dictation given before the sojourn, and a taped narrative immediately following Hiro's time overseas. For the sake of comparison, at the end of this paper, I will contrast Hiro's narrative and proficiency measures with those of a female participant in the larger study who was Hiro's classmate in Japan and who went to the same host school.

Macro-Level Factors

Hiro was born in 1982 and came to the International Course at Kansai High in 1998.² In the years prior to Hiro's arrival at Kansai High, there were two macro-level factors related to this study that were affecting Japanese secondary education programs: a move to internationalize Japan following the 1985 Plaza Accord and a declining fertility rate. In an attempt to attract more students in this climate, many private schools such as Kansai High became coed and simultaneously opened international courses of study emphasizing English education and de-emphasizing the maths and sciences (see Umakoshi, 1997, for a discussion of this trend at the university level in Japan). By design, these curricula were largely created to attract female applicants to schools (see Fujimura-Fanselow, 1995, on gender tracking in schools in Japan). As a case in point, Kansai High went coed when it opened the International Course and, over the years, approximately 90% of the students in the International Course have been female. In the cohort that Hiro joined, he was one of four males in a class of 47 students. In this way, we can see how dynamics at the macro-level can influence how learners get locally positioned in gendered ways.

It should be noted that Hiro's male minority status in the International Course and subsequently in his study abroad program is not unique. In a review of 11 studies which evaluated the overseas homestay experience of nearly 1,000 Japanese students, there were only 24 male participants (Churchill, 2003a). A similar but less dramatic trend appears to exist for British and American learners studying overseas. For example, of the 34 learners studying overseas investigated in the June 2004 volume of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* mentioned above, approximately one fourth were male. In Barbara Freed's (1995) edited volume on study abroad, approximately 40% of the learners were male. Talburt and Stewart (1999) report that in the 1994-1995 academic year 38% of the U.S. students going abroad to learn language were male. Also, in a survey of 28 schools sending students abroad from England in 1995, Taylor (2000) found approximately one third of the students were male. As suggested by a survey of the literature, while Hiro was in the minority among his peers in the International Course and in the study abroad program, his minority status as a male is not exceptional. However, as shall be argued below, his minority status had implications for how his language learning experiences and opportunities were constructed in Japan and in the United States.

Hiro in Japan

To describe Hiro in a sentence, he was sociable, polite, upstanding, and sensitive, and he took pride in his athletic achievements and academic work, but his attempts to be thorough contributed to a slower working pace when compared to his peers. When he came to the International Course, he was arguably less prepared academically than many of his classmates. He had the lowest entrance exam score (Japanese, English, and Social Studies) in his class and he received a 330 on the institutional TOEFL. The average for his class was 347 with a high of 450. He received a rating of mid novice on an oral proficiency interview, modeled on the ACTFL OPI, also administered upon his arrival at Kansai High. Again, this was lower than the class average of high novice. Despite these low scores, he was interested in English, listened to the local English radio program, and dreamed of becoming an English-speaking disc jockey. Although athletic, Hiro was comparatively small for his age. This may explain why he gravitated towards sports emphasizing finesse and individual performance (e.g., track and field, kendo) over strength and size.

Hiro's status as a male in the minority limited his network for academic support. As in many Japanese high schools, all of Hiro's classes, with the exception of physical education, were taken with the same class members. Particularly in his 1st and 2nd year of high school, the majority of Hiro's interaction with classmates was with the other three males. This apparently influenced the degree of academic support he received from his peers. His course grades were consistently towards the bottom of the class. He attributed this at least in part to the fact that he did his work on his own while he felt that his female counterparts were doing a lot more sharing.

Hiro's minority status in his class also led him to actively create social networks with males outside of his class. This was done through his extracurricular activity, kendo, and by socializing with students in his PE class and at lunch time. While these friends gave Hiro an important social network and provided him with leadership experience (he was the kendo club captain in his 2nd year), they also limited the amount of time, energy, and support he had available for his studies. In terms of time and energy, kendo practices frequently lasted 4 to 5 hours, which meant that Hiro could not return home until 9 p.m., leaving him little time to do his homework. As a result, he was often late with assignments for his English for academic purposes writing and reading classes. In terms of academic support from peers, as many of his friends were in courses of study that emphasized the sciences or sports, he received little help from them with his English intensive stud-

ies. To conclude this section, Hiro came to the International Course arguably less prepared (i.e., lower entrance exam and proficiency scores) than most of his classmates. Throughout his tenure at Kansai High, his academic difficulties were compounded by limitations in terms of time and peer support, related in part to his male minority status.

Program factors affecting host placement

The curriculum of the International Course was designed such that students went to study abroad for a month in the fall of their 2nd year. The program entailed a 3-week homestay and 1-week of sightseeing. For the homestay component, Kansai High had established a relationship with four host schools in the same greater metropolitan area. When making host school assignments, the prevailing assumption among teachers at Kansai High was that—all else being equal—it was best to split up existing friendship groups. The rationale was that if the students were not placed in schools with their closest friends, they would have more opportunities to interact with English speakers in the United States. Based on this approach to student placement, from Hiro's class, one boy was sent to each of the four host schools.

While student placement in the host schools was carried out with the intent of enhancing opportunities for all students to interact more with native speakers, it actually led to different opportunities for males and females in the fall of 1999. Several of the host schools experienced difficulty in finding host families, in part because of the large number of students (i.e., 47). Some families—notably older couples living alone—were only willing to host two students together. With only one boy assigned to each school, it was very unlikely that a boy would be paired with a female classmate. In fact, Hiro and his three male classmates were each placed as the sole exchange student in a family while many of their female peers were housed together. In several of these later cases, there was no English-speaking peer or younger child in the home. At the school to which Hiro was assigned, half of the females ended up sharing a host family (see Churchill, 2003a for more details on host assignments). In other words, macro-factors leading to Hiro's minority status in the International Course combined with decisions made at the program level and by host schools and families to lead to varying degrees of opportunities to interact in the host home, with more of the female participants in the program placed in families where they had to compete against each other to interact with native speakers (See Churchill, 2003a; 2003b).

Hiro's experience abroad

Hiro was placed into a home of an advanced speaker of English, a native of Spain, who lived with her American-born 9-year-old son. This allowed Hiro to take on the role of the older brother/role model and also act as a helper around the house. A great deal of the interaction that Hiro was exposed to was between his host mother and her 9-year-old son. Hiro commented on how it was easier to understand English when adults were speaking to his host brother. In addition, Hiro's host brother often invited friends to his house and Hiro spent lots of time playing video games with his host brother and his peers.

Hiro's status as a male in the minority not only afforded him more opportunities for English interaction in the host home, but it also helped generate situations in which he could interact more at school. As the chaperone at the host school, I assisted the exchange students in getting oriented. One of my tasks on the first day was to help the exchange students find their way to their extra-curricular activities and get the appropriate equipment. As there were eight females who had elected to play soccer or field hockey, I asked Hiro to find his own way to the cross-country team while I attended to the equipment needs of his female classmates. In an interview following his return to Japan, Hiro commented on being told to find the team on his own:

I chose cross-country because I had to run in junior high school...I had no detail about cross-country at St. Martin's, but the first day I was the only Japanese in club. Mr. Churchill said to me 'go to club alone'. But it was my first time without Mr. Churchill and other students. Then I thought "Where do I go?" but now I think this was the best way...On the first day at club, a lot of students asked a lot of questions about cross-country in Japan and club in Japan. Mostly, I couldn't understand what they were saying, but they didn't mind my English. (interview, November 24th)

Left on his own, Hiro obviously had some difficulty in interacting with native speakers, but—as he notes—perhaps this was “the best way” because it gave him opportunities to start engaging with his host peers.

In contrast, my attempt to help the female exchange students was only met with partial success. We managed to borrow the necessary sports equipment, but the attendant at the gym, being overworked and having had a bad memory of dealing with previous exchange students who forgot their locker combinations, suggested that the girls change clothes “somewhere in

the main building.” Ultimately, the girls decided to change clothes at a host family house near campus. This had consequences for the degree to which they were able to interact with their teammates. While the females wrote in their journals about interacting with their host team members, this occurred comparatively later than it did for Hiro. Moreover, the quality of the interaction was not as intense. For example, on the second day of their stay, many of the teams had away games. As the female exchange students were not deemed ready to join a game, it was suggested that they stay on campus.

Meanwhile, on his first day of practice, Hiro was surprised to find himself invited to run in his first race.

I went running with them on the first day and they did not run so hard because it was the day before a game, so I could follow them...Then one student said, ‘Hiro can join the game’ ‘you could join the game.’ I thought it was a joke. Can you imagine joining the team and going on a race the next day? (interview, November 24th)

As Hiro pointed out, his participation in the meets also implicated other shared activities such as eating lunch with his teammates before the meet, riding on the team bus, cheering for each other, sharing showers, and eating dinner together upon his return. For example, in an interview following his time abroad, Hiro said, “When I went to the game, I used the bath at the school, I took a shower with the other students. It was me and the other students together” (interview, November 24th).

In the morning following Hiro’s first race, there was a school-wide assembly to welcome the Kansai High students. Each of the students took turns introducing themselves. While most of the students identified themselves by their activities in Japan (e.g., “My name is Natsumi. I play the French horn.”), Hiro positioned himself as a member of the community by saying “I love this school. I am on the cross-country team.” Following this, Hiro continued associating himself with the cross-country team. For example, on the first Saturday (the fifth day of the program), Hiro opted out of an excursion organized for the Japanese exchange students so that he could run in another race. His continual appearance in the school’s cross-country uniform on race days and fraternizing with team members led him to be recognized by other students in the school. Two weeks into his stay, he went to the cafeteria alone. When he was looking for a place to sit, a student from the host school invited Hiro to join him. Later, Hiro said, “someone who I didn’t know called me. He said, ‘why don’t you sit here?’ He knew I was a member of cross-country so he asked me about cross-country” (interview, November 24th).

“We talked a lot about club activities, Japan and the United States music and fashion. I could enjoy the breakfast and we could be friendly” (Final Essay).

Hiro also discussed these topics regularly with his cross-country team members. He talked about fashion, hobbies, music, and girls with them, and he asked them to explain their use of teenage vernacular. He was also asked questions about the “strange” fashion of his Japanese classmates and occasionally encouraged to become an intermediary for some of his teammates interested in meeting his female peers. Thus, Hiro’s gender not only comparatively enhanced his language learning opportunities in the host home, but also gave him more chances to interact with English-speaking peers and helped position him as a broker on the playing field of interpersonal relations.

Outcomes

Towards the end of his stay, Hiro noted how his host family and campus friends commented on how his English had improved. In his last journal entry, he wrote:

In these three weeks, I could have a lot of experiences of to speak English. Sometimes, I feel that I could change my English. Maybe my English could develop by this staying. For example, when I came to this school, I didn’t talk something so much, because I was afraid to speak my English, but now if I want to talk or ask someone, I can talk and ask freely....What makes me so positive? May be I think it is not only this English sphere, but also I could make a lot of friend. When I talk to them, I have to speak English because they can’t speak Japanese. It’s very simple reason, but I think this reason is the most important thing for me. (Journal entry, November 4th)

By his own account, Hiro’s English improved because he had a lot of chances to speak with native speakers. As we have seen, many of the opportunities afforded Hiro arose from the ways in which his gender interacted with program-level decisions, as well as with local dynamics at the host school.

To support Hiro’s claim that his English had improved, we can look at a 2-minute extract of a narrative that he provided on “the most interesting thing that happened” to him while he was overseas. Not surprisingly, Hiro elected to talk about his experience on the cross-country team.³

Finally (0.9) I had u:m (0.9) maybe:: six to seven, no five to six races (0.8) so finally (0.4) they have a big big (0.5) u:m (1.1) race of league

championship (0.7) u:m (1.3) but (1.3) it was it it um we had some problems. (1.1) Of course (0.5) u:m (1.3) we I can I can join (0.6) u:h I thought I can join the final race, but coach said to me (0.7) u::h (2.5) you you may not (1.3) I don't know yet but you may not join to the last race (0.4) because you are you are you are not really (0.4) our our team member (0.4) you a::re exchange student. (1.0) So (0.5) But then, everyone said to coach, "Why Hiro (0.5) can't join that game. (0.6) Why? (1.1) No reason! (0.5) Hiro can join to last race because Hiro is member of our team." I was very sur- I was so happy (0.5) so (0.6)if (0.5) I can not joi- I can't join (0.4) the race (0.5) it will be OK because I had a very good good (0.7) I was so happy (1.0) uh (1.6) so the next day (0.7) was the last day and last race. I go to see- (1.0) I went to (1.0) I went to::: (0.5) the race (0.5) and tea- (1.2) uh (0.6) teacher (0.7) no coach gives me um (0.6) teammate (0.4) the number (1.4) then teacher called me my number (0.5) I was so happy (0.4) I can- (0.5) I could have a race and they they said to me, good job Hiro.

This 2-minute segment not only provides evidence of the depth of Hiro's involvement in local social practices, but also exhibits inklings of speech patterns that resulted from this participation. Hiro's narrative nicely illustrates the negotiated nature of his membership on the team, and how he was practically seen as a full-fledged member by the end of his 3 weeks at the host school. It also includes instances of indirect speech in which he quotes his teammates, suggestive of the degree of his interaction with native speakers of English. Although difficult to portray here, some of his vowels were rounded, much like the vowels used by locals in his host context. In terms of accuracy, while there are some problems in his use of verb tense, many of the verbs are in the past tense or he corrects himself to provide the past tense. In terms of fluency, Hiro uttered 185 words, averaging 92.5 words per minute. His average pause length was 0.78 seconds and his longest stretch of speech without a pause is 17 words long (See Table 1). Overall, Hiro still had a lot of progress to make. However, when compared to female learners who came to the same host school with similar proficiency scores, Hiro made the most progress.

For comparison, we can look at a similar narrative provided by a female Japanese peer who went to the same host school as Hiro. Natsumi, the French-horn player mentioned earlier, like Hiro, had struggled to balance her academic work with the demands of her brass band extra-curricular activity in Japan. However, she generally managed slightly better than Hiro. At the start of her time in the International Course, her TOEFL score was 50

points higher than Hiro's and she had a rating similar to Hiro's on the oral proficiency interview (see Table 2). Prior to their departure for the United States, they obtained similar scores on a dictation.

Table 1. Post-study abroad narrative (2 mins.) fluency measures

Measure	Hiro	Natsumi
Number of words	185	147
Words/minute	92.5	73.5
Number of syllables	242	212
Syllables/second	2.85	2.72
Average pause length	0.78 seconds	1.42 seconds
Longest stretch	17 words	13 words

**Table 2. Pre-Post ITP TOEFL scores
and Oral Proficiency Interview ratings**

Test	Hiro	Natsumi
ITP TOEFL - Pre	330	380
ITP TOEFL - Post	443	440
OPI-Pre	mid-novice	mid-novice
OPI-Post	low-intermediate	low-intermediate

During her study abroad, she ended up being housed together with another female from Kansai High in a family where there were no children at home. She joined the field hockey team with four other peers, but as they were new to the sport, their practice time was generally spent hitting the ball to each other on the side of the field. When the team had away games, she stayed on campus with her Japanese peers or took trips with them off campus. She did not write or speak about sharing meals with members of the field hockey team. Significantly, when asked to tell the most interesting thing that happened to her in the program, like many of her female classmates, Natsumi decided to narrate an experience she had with her classmates from

Japan. In Natsumi's case, this was a trip to a haunted house the day before Halloween.

There are many (0.8) scary things. There are many scary things. For example, uh Jason with (1.1) wi::th (3.4) chainsaw (1.1) and for a (0.8) big bump and u:h (1.6) a big truck with many: (1.3) sad children. (5.5) Especially, I am surprise (2.4) I am surpri- I was surprised that the (0.8) Jason with chainsaw. It is really scary for me (0.8) I think (0.8) "Oh I, it's dangerous" and "I will di::e" (0.9) but it is very safety (0.6) for me, for us. (2.6) Un and also (3.1) Japan eh American haunted house (0.5) is different (0.6) Japanese haunted house very much because I think it can it ca::n (1.1) if in Japan I can't look like that it (1.5). I think it's very interesting. (0.9) But I can feel very (1.1) It is very scary but I can feel really warm heart (0.6) because there are many family (0.6) a::nd children so they they try to (1.0) enjoy their jobs and the I I think they do did really good job (1.9) The:y try to me- (0.8) try to (3.0) try to (1.0) me good feelings.

Compared to Hiro's narrative, Natsumi's makes far more use of the present tense. In contrast to Hiro, when Natsumi uses reported speech, it is to quote her own utterances, not those of English speaking interlocutors. There are also fewer syllables overall and a longer average pause length (1.42 seconds) (see Table 1). She also has a slower speech rate and articulation rate than Hiro, and her vowels were not rounded in ways that approached local norms.

In the long term, Hiro's increased ability and confidence with English translated into a slight improvement in his academic standing after he returned to Japan, largely because of his grades in his communicative English classes. However, this slight improvement in his confidence, English speaking ability, and grades was not enough to overcome the weight of his lower class ranking leading up to the exchange when it came to deciding his college options. Placement by special recommendation into the university affiliated with Kansai High was competitive and largely dependent on the students' grade point averages. Moreover, as Hiro and his 46 classmates had concentrated on English in the International Course, the English department was in high demand with the large number of students in Hiro's class making the demand even more intense. Thus, while Hiro and Natsumi both graduated from high school with approximately the same TOEFL score and the same OPI rating, their future opportunities to continue learning English differed. Natsumi—whose overall academic standing was better than Hiro's

prior to and following the study abroad experience—got a seat in the English department. On the other hand, Hiro who had struggled academically prior to—and somewhat less so following—the short-term exchange could not get into the English department, and was subsequently placed in the Spanish department. While Hiro benefited from his status as a male in the minority in terms of language learning opportunities when studying abroad, at home his gender contributed to his difficulties in getting good grades, and it was ultimately these grades upon which decisions regarding his future were made.

Implications

This case study adds a Japanese male narrative to the literature highlighting gender-related differences in language learning opportunities and outcomes that arise while studying abroad. I have suggested that macro-level dynamics related to internationalization and Japan's declining birth rate contributed to the creation of international courses such as the one at Kansai High, and that these courses largely targeted female students. This played a significant role in leading to Hiro's minority male status in his class and in the study abroad program. Hiro's minority status in his class in Japan likely restricted his opportunities to participate in social networks that may have helped his academic standing and language learning. Ultimately, in competition with his classmates for a restricted number of seats in the English department at the affiliated university, Hiro ended up entering the Spanish department where his future opportunities to learn English would be limited. However, as a minority male among the exchange students, he had a more favorable learning environment in the host home, was more noticeable at school, and found it easier to extend his social network of English speakers in the host context. Hiro's initial integration into the cross-country team was co-constructed through efforts of his teammates, coach, and even unwittingly by his chaperone from Japan who encouraged him to find his way on his own. Hiro actively positioned himself as a member of the team at all available opportunities (e.g., identifying himself with the team at the school-wide assembly, and going to races as opposed to off-campus events). As he was recognized by the host community as a member of the cross-country team, he was also given more opportunities for language use and learning as he interacted with other native speakers (e.g., sharing breakfast with strangers). Also, because of his dual status as a male athlete and Japanese visitor to the school, he was asked to act as a broker between his team members and his female peers from Japan. The overall argument

is that the way that Hiro's gender and the gender of his female peers was constructed in the short-term study abroad program led to varying language learning opportunities and outcomes that ultimately favored Hiro. Conversely, at home in Japan, where the rules of the language learning game and the measures of success differed, Hiro's minority male status ultimately put constraints on his study time and available network of academic peers. To paraphrase Ehrlich (1997), locally constructed social practices can lead to a gender-based variance in learning opportunities, and hence a discrepancy in acquisition outcomes.

Hiro's case supports the literature suggesting that males studying abroad can experience greater gains in oral proficiency (fluency and accuracy) than many of their female counterparts. Hiro's case is supported by and adds to the study by Brecht and colleagues (Brecht et al., 1995) who found that among their American University students studying in Russia for 4 months, males gained more in their listening ability and oral proficiency. The comparison of Natsumi and Hiro also confirms the findings by Carlson and colleagues (Carlson et al., 1990) on American university students studying in France and Germany. They claim:

the single most powerful predictor of language change was gender, accounting for just over seven percent of the variance...Examinations of the means of males and females both before and after the study abroad showed that the greatest gains in language proficiency was made by the males. Prior to the study abroad year, the males were substantially lower than the females in foreign language proficiency. By the end of the sojourn, however, the males made gains that brought them up to the level of the females. (p. 79)

These results are also mirrored in the work of Isabelli-Garcia (2003, 2004, 2006) who revealed, in her investigation of motivation and social networks of American university students in Argentina, that the majority of American males investigated made more progress in their oral proficiency than the female participants.

The implication for study abroad programs, and especially school-sponsored study abroad programs originating from Japan—where the ratio of gender difference is perhaps the most pronounced—is that we need to be more attentive to how macro-factors and program-level decisions interact with host school and family placements, and to the consequences of these structures and decisions for the language learning experiences of program participants. In terms of research on study abroad, perhaps not surprisingly,

there is an increasing amount of evidence that host contexts are not only experienced differently by different learners (Churchill, 2006), but also constructed by, for, and with learners in gendered ways. More work is needed to investigate the various ways gender relations are mutually constituted at the macro-, program, and micro-levels in these contexts, and the resulting consequences for language learning opportunities. Moreover, in larger scale studies that investigate learning through quantitative measures, greater attention should be paid to the comparative progress made by males and females. Unfortunately, since Brecht et al. (1995) studied American learners of Russian, few quantitative studies have focused specifically on the differential language learning progress by males and females in study abroad contexts.

As I have argued here, there are also likely differences in the at-home language learning setting which arise from the way gender is locally constructed. It would seem to follow that when studies are designed to assess the comparative advantage of studying abroad or at home (e.g., Collentine & Freed, 2004), we could all benefit from learning how these contexts are experienced differently by males and females and how these different experiences affect learning outcomes. An investigation of how gains differ by gender might help account for some of the more unexpected findings reported in comparison studies (e.g., Freed et al., 2004). Such a perspective could also help us further appreciate the complex—and often gendered—ways in which contexts, language learning opportunities, and related outcomes are mutually constituted.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at AAAL 2005 in Madison, Wisconsin.
2. The names of the participants and the schools are pseudonyms.
3. The numbers in parentheses indicate the length of pauses between utterances. Colons indicate elongated vowels and hyphens denote truncated speech.

Eton Churchill received his EdD from Temple University and is currently an Associate Professor at Kanagawa University. He is the co-editor of *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts*. His research interests include study abroad and sociocognitive approaches to second language acquisition.

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