

## Second Language Identity Development of Short-Term Study Abroad Students

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### Reference Data:

Chan, S. Y. C. (2018). Second language identity development of short-term study abroad students. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & P. Bennett (Eds.), *Language teaching in a global age: Shaping the classroom, shaping the world*. Tokyo: JALT.

As part of a larger study of short-term study abroad (SA) students, this paper is focused on two EFL learners from a Hong Kong university who participated in an 8-week English language and cultural immersion program in the U.K. Various data were collected at 4 times: before, during, and immediately after SA and 4 months later. Adopting a poststructuralist approach to L2 identity, discussion centers on the learners' L2 development and language learning. The findings suggest that the participants' L2 identity varied across time and space. Both internal and environmental factors contributed to L2 identity development. Drawing on the findings, I discuss the implications for the preparation for and enhancement of the language and intercultural learning experiences of students who undertake short-term SA programs.

短期海外留学生の大規模な調査の一部として、この研究論文では、8週間の英国における語学と文化学習のイメージングプログラムに参加した香港大学の外国語としての英語 (EFL) 学習者2名に焦点を当てている。彼らが参加したプログラムに関する活動の軌跡を追跡した調査によって、定性的および定量的データを集めた。L2 (第2言語) アイデンティティの開発に向けたポスト構造主義的アプローチを採用し、L2アイデンティティや言語と異文化間の学習について、在留前、在留中、在留終了後、そして終了後4か月の時点について考察した。これらの調査の結果に基づいて、本論では、短期留学プログラム参加者のために、言語と異文化間の学習経験に向けてより良い準備とプログラムの中身の充実を提案する。

Recently, there have been more L2 learners participating in short-term study abroad (SA) programs in English-speaking countries (e.g., Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Jackson, 2008; Lee, 2009). Given the complexity of the SA experience, SA researchers have advocated the need to investigate students' L2 identity development,

which encompasses both L2 proficiency and personal development (e.g., Benson et al., 2013; Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2008, 2010, Kinginger, 2009). As part of a larger study involving short-term SA students, this paper focuses on two EFL learners from a Hong Kong university who participated in an 8-week English language immersion program in the U.K. My aim is to address the participants' L2 identity development and the factors that contributed to that development. Although the paper focuses largely on two L2 learners, the findings may resonate with other L2 learners who take part in short-term SA programs.

### Background

Researchers investigating language learning and identity have recently drawn on poststructuralist perspectives on identity as multiple, often contradictory, and subject to change in different social contexts (e.g., Block, 2007; Norton, 2014). This perspective is useful in understanding language learning in SA, which is complex and idiosyncratic. Researchers have found that both environmental and individual variations as well as learners' social networks contribute to individual learners' developmental trajectories (e.g., Coleman, 2013; Jackson, 2012; Kinginger, 2009). Coleman (2013) emphasized the importance of raising awareness of individual variability, which “comprises a number of cognitive, affective, and biographical variables, . . . each of which is fluid and context-dependent” (p. 26). Individual differences such as language learning history, SA goals and expectations, personality, and affective factors (e.g., confidence, self-efficacy, and attitude toward the L2) may lead to different developmental trajectories. Learners' sense of self in the L2 may also evolve according to various external factors (e.g., accommodations and program components).

In a study of Hong Kong students participating in SA programs in English-speaking countries, Benson et al. (2013) defined L2 identity broadly as “any aspect of a person's identity that is connected to their knowledge or use of a L2” (p. 28). Specifically, L2

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identity is a “complex, multidimensional construct and . . . what we see of a person’s identity varies according to the context” (p. 2). They argued that investigating learners’ L2 identity is useful to better understand SA outcomes in which L2 proficiency and personal development are inextricably related. To capture the holistic nature of potential SA outcomes, they proposed a framework of L2 identity that encompasses three components: identity-related L2 proficiency, linguistic self-concept, and L2-mediated personal competence. Regarding identity-related L2 proficiency, they highlighted improvements particularly related to sociopragmatic competence and learners’ ability to show their desired identity. Linguistic self-concept refers to “students’ affiliations to the languages they know and their conceptions of their capabilities as they are articulated in, for example, self-assessments of proficiency, goals, self-efficacy, motivation, and beliefs” (p. 46). The researchers argued that development in this dimension is also concerned with learners’ sense of self in the L2, as this may affect how they approach the language in different contexts. L2-mediated personal competence consists of personal development and intercultural competence, both of which are mediated through the L2. This study drew on these dimensions in examining the participants’ L2 identity development.

The following research questions are addressed:

- RQ1. How did the participants perceive their L2 identity before, during, and after their SA program?
- RQ 2. What factors impacted their L2 learning and identity development?

## Method

The study focused on an 8-week English immersion component of the English Language Education (ELED) program at a university in Hong Kong. All students were required to complete this credit-bearing component, which was designed to provide L2 learning opportunities in an English-speaking environment and expand exposure to educational practices outside Hong Kong.

The program took place during the summer of 2016 at a university in northeast England, and students lived with a homestay family during the 8 weeks. There were 20 hours of classes weekly, mainly focusing on English language enhancement and teaching methodology. The program also provided visits to primary and secondary schools. Social and cultural excursions were organized during weekday afternoons.

## Participants

Twenty 3rd-year students participated in the immersion program and were invited to join the study. Nine were selected as participants based on their willingness to participate, the fact that English was their second language, and the fact that they had little or no previous SA experience in tertiary education. To gain deeper insight into the factors that impact language and intercultural learning experiences during SA, the remainder of the paper centers on Allen and Kate (pseudonyms). As the foregoing analysis suggests, both of them experienced L2 learning and identity development during SA.

Allen and Kate were 20 and 21 years old respectively when the study began. Both were of Hong Kong Chinese extraction and spoke Cantonese as their L1 and English as an L2. Before the SA period, they had had limited experience abroad. Allen had not participated in any SA programs or traveled to any English-speaking countries. When Kate was in high school, she had participated in a 2-week SA program in Australia. In the predeparture survey, both reported having few international friends and limited intercultural interactions in Hong Kong. They were both preparing for careers as secondary school EFL teachers.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The study utilized a case study design, which is well suited to investigating the developmental trajectory of L2 students in SA contexts (e.g., Benson et al., 2013; Jackson, 2008, 2010). The data consisted mainly of semistructured interviews conducted at four points: before, during, and immediately after SA and 4 months later. All of the participants opted for interviews in their native language, Cantonese, and I transcribed and translated the interviews into English. During translation, efforts were made to retain participants’ nuances and emotions. Interview transcripts were sent to each of the participants for member checking to ensure fair representation of their viewpoints (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). With participants’ consent, pre- and postimmersion reflective essays and reflective journals were also reviewed to provide additional insight into their experiences. The essays and journals were written in English, and excerpts are mostly in their original form except for minor editing of grammar and spelling. I adopted a recursive process of coding and analysis (Grbich, 2013), identifying potential patterns and paying attention to repeated words and phrases (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 11, was used to process the interview and written data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Coding was also open and ongoing, with codes modified when necessary (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Grbich, 2013).

## Findings

This section first presents Allen's story, followed by Kate's. Throughout the remainder of the paper, the two participants' voices dominate, and when necessary, an etic (researcher's) perspective is provided to draw attention to individual and external factors that influenced the way their stories took shape. When relevant, I draw comparisons with the stories of some of the other participants who participated in the main study.

### Allen's Story

Before SA, Allen displayed a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in L2 learning. He was intrinsically motivated to learn English due to his interest in reading literature and attributed his extrinsic motivation to his future career as an EFL teacher, stating in the pre-SA interview, "I have to learn more English teaching methods." He had mostly used English for academic purposes and had limited L2 use in social settings. He regarded himself as an L2 learner who needed to further improve his English skills, especially listening and speaking in social settings.

In the pre-SA interview and preimmersion reflective essay, Allen discussed his SA goals: (a) to improve oral communication skills for everyday living, (b) to enhance L2 confidence, (c) to learn about the host and other cultures, and (d) to make friends with people from various cultural backgrounds. He was particularly eager to use the language in an authentic environment and expected to encounter difficulty while abroad as a result of his inability to use it appropriately in communication. He did not appear to have established any concrete coping strategies. In the pre-SA interview, he simply stated that he would open his mind to possibilities and talk with his hosts about his concerns, otherwise indicating that he had thought little about preparing for language learning overseas.

Allen stayed with a host family that consisted of a married couple and their four children. Although he was a bit nervous when talking to his hosts in the beginning, because of his hosts' friendliness, he gradually became more relaxed. As SA progressed, he was able to engage in deeper conversations covering an array of both informal topics (e.g., food) and more serious ones (e.g., current affairs and political issues).

During the first 3 weeks of SA, Allen was required to take an intercultural course with other international students from the host university with whom he had opportunities to discuss different cultural issues, and he had to write two reflective journal entries each week based on his observations and interpretations of local culture and practices. His entries reveal his observational skills and sociopragmatic awareness. For example, in one

entry, he wrote about the interaction between passengers and a bus driver: "When I first rode on the bus here, I saw all passengers saying 'thank you' to the bus driver without exception. The bus drivers would usually reply with another greeting, or by saying 'cheers'" (Allen, journal entry). He followed suit and reflected upon the practice:

I started to find this subtle behavior simple but effective to express the thankfulness and maintain politeness. This act also realizes the core value of the British as an egalitarian group . . . "Thank you" and "Please" are the basics to 'survive' in this place. (Allen, journal entry)

His written narratives also displayed his positive attitude towards local communicative norms. Among the nine participants, Allen was the only student who traveled alone in the host country on weekends. In interviews, he revealed that he had initiated conversations with other tourists in the youth hostel, which he seldom did in Hong Kong. This indicates his interest in communicating with others in English.

As an L2 learner in the host environment, Allen believed that he became more confident about using English. His understanding of English as a communicative tool, particularly in intercultural interactions, also developed. Near the end of SA, in contrast to the beginning, he revealed he felt more at ease in using L2 in conversations. In one interview, he remarked,

In terms of listening skills, it's about not being afraid to lose face. When I can't comprehend what others say, I'll honestly tell them I don't understand. It's inevitable that I can't comprehend sometimes, it's unnecessary to deny this. Further, I may not be able to get the meaning the first time but I may be able to do so the second time. I'll reflect on the part that I couldn't understand at the first place and sort it out. This is the way I work on my listening skills. (Allen, SA interview)

The above excerpt indicates his understanding of his L2 skills. His positive mind-set also allowed him to use the L2 in the host environment where he was able to expand his L2 identity.

Besides motivation, agency, and interest in communicating with others, external factors such as supportive hosts and encouraging tutors at the host university also contributed to Allen's desire to use English in the host environment. Identifying himself as an English user in the host environment, he stated that he could use English in a more lighthearted way when communicating with locals and described himself as an "explorer" of the language. He believed that staying in the host environment raised awareness of English use in everyday conversations such as politeness norms. Allen wished to be identified as a competent communicator in English in the host community.

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Immediately after SA, when Allen reflected on his immersion experience, he stated that his L2 confidence had increased and that this would allow him to further develop as an L2 user. Moreover, he revealed that he had become more interested in learning daily conversational English and affirmed a strong sense that English cannot be isolated from daily life. After learning about the historical and cultural background of English in the U.K., he was eager to explore the language from different perspectives.

### *Kate's Story*

Similar to Allen, Kate displayed a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for L2 learning before SA. In particular, she possessed a sense of obligation to “work hard” to hone her English skills to become a future EFL teacher. She had mostly used English in academic settings, had limited intercultural interactions, and did not display a high level of interest in communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, which she attributed to her lack of topics to converse about. She did not appear to be confident with using English in informal settings and described herself as a beginning L2 learner compared with her peers. Nonetheless, her perceived lack of English proficiency motivated her to improve her English skills, especially as she associated high proficiency with her imagined identity as a good English teacher. In the pre-SA interview she said, “As I’m going to be a teacher of English, my English proficiency has to be good. I’d be in trouble if I teach students wrongly.” Because of Kate’s future occupation, she possessed a sense of obligation to “work hard” on her English.

Kate set the following goals for her stay in the U.K.: (a) to enhance her academic writing skills, (b) to improve her English conversational skills, (c) to learn more about different cultures, and (d) to learn about foreign language pedagogy (Kate, pre-SA interview and preimmersion reflective essay). Similar to Allen, she had high expectations that the immersion program would provide her with an opportunity to learn the language in an “authentic English-speaking community” (Kate, pre-SA interview). She was most looking forward to the homestay experience, though she also expressed concerns about it. Prior to the program, none of the participants had SA experience at the tertiary level. Kate was the only one who had previous SA experience (a 2-week program in Australia when she was in grade nine). In her preimmersion reflective essay, she discussed her previous SA experience and described herself as a “timid girl” who did not interact much with her host family. This time, she expected herself to be “able to carry out deeper conversations” with her hosts as she was a university student. As a way of coping with her perceived lack of L2 proficiency, she planned to learn more vocabulary and read news stories about the host country in order to be able to talk about a wider

range of topics. Unlike Allen, Kate shared her host family with another student, her close friend Grace (pseudonym), and expected that she and Grace would help each other when they could not understand their hosts.

Kate’s host family consisted of a middle-aged couple and their daughter who was in her late 20s. Kate described her hosts as very friendly, and she sought opportunities to interact with them (e.g., by staying home for dinner). During SA, most of her interactions took place at her homestay. Kate and Grace chose to converse in English amongst themselves, which they had not done in Hong Kong. Throughout the program, they sustained this effort, something that their peers rarely did. Kate was determined to have a different experience than she had previously had and sought opportunities to interact with her hosts and engage in deeper conversations with them. She perceived her hosts to be very friendly and willing to chat and share information and ideas about the host culture with her and Grace. Her hosts also contributed to her engagement in interactions with them. For instance, Kate reported that her hosts would often ask her about Hong Kong as well as their studies at the host university.

As Kate’s aim was to learn about different cultural values, she made good use of her observational skills in different communicative contexts. For example, she stated that she enjoyed local humor and ways of expressing gratitude. She also possessed a positive attitude towards local communicative norms (e.g., small talk, showing appreciation), as indicated in a journal entry about how local people verbally displayed appreciation: “Helping my host mum at home, I am always praised by her. After carrying the shopping bags into the kitchen, she will say, ‘you’re very helpful!’ After cutting the lettuce, she will say, ‘that looks excellent!’” (Kate, journal entry).

In one interview, Kate described her relationship with her hosts as “friends.” She stated that she would also praise her host mother’s cooking. She appreciated this explicit way of expressing compliments and was keen to apply this to her interactions with her students in the future: “I promise I will be more generous in praising my students and children in the future” (Kate, journal entry).

Kate suggested that her interactions with the international students in the intercultural studies course also allowed her to reflect on her attitudes towards English and intercultural knowledge. Nonetheless, compared to Allen, she appeared to have spent less time with the other students and did not meet with them after class. Instead, her host family had frequent interactions with family and friends, and Kate was able to interact with them as a result. Kate indicated that she found the gatherings very enjoyable and learnt about English wordplay during conversations with them.



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My host dad introduced his daughter's boyfriend to his friends during dinner with the term current boyfriend. His guest immediately made fun of him: "That's how you introduce your daughter's boyfriend? You used the word 'current.'" I hadn't expected that the use of word "current" would make people laugh in a conversation. (Kate, SA interview)

Kate displayed growing confidence and enhanced interest in communicating in the L2 after she had gained more intercultural knowledge and actual experiences of L2 use. She began to identify herself as an L2 user in the host community.

Immediately after SA, Kate further described the impact of the immersion experience on her L2 identity: "The immersion experience also lets me realize . . . how contextual knowledge contributes greatly to comprehension. Therefore, I must try harder to improve by learning more world knowledge and vocabulary" (Kate, post-SA questionnaire survey).

She was also eager to share cultural knowledge with her students in English lessons in the future. Back in Hong Kong, she suggested that she was more willing to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds because of her enhanced confidence and knowledge.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study is limited in that the findings have been derived mainly from the participants' self-reporting data, which may not reflect the full picture of their SA experience. With this limitation in mind, contextual descriptions were provided whenever possible to explain the background of the participants' learning experience. Future studies can incorporate some form of triangulation to better understand L2 learners' SA experience, such as interviews with the people participants have regular contact with in the host country (e.g., host family members). Nevertheless, this study lends insight into the participants' learning experience in SA for SA researchers and instructors at both home and host institutions.

Before SA, Allen and Kate indicated their desire to enhance their oral communication skills in the host community. In particular, they had high expectations that the program would provide them with opportunities to use English in an authentic environment. Similar to the findings of previous SA studies of L2 learners (e.g., Allen, 2013), at this stage, they did not appear to have established concrete language learning strategies to guide their learning.

From the outset, Allen and Kate appeared to have awareness of local communicative norms. Allen was determined to enhance his oral conversational skills while abroad and as a result, he was willing to step out of his comfort zone and interact with different people, such as his hosts and international students. During SA, his risk-taking attitude enabled him to develop his language abilities by communicating with people in different situations (e.g., tourists in youth hostels). These developments may also be attributed to his positive mind-set and in-depth reflection. Kate was eager to have an experience that was different from her previous SA experience in grade nine. She actively engaged herself in interacting with her hosts and exercised agency in conversing with her close friend in English. Like Allen, Kate possessed a positive mind-set towards local communicative norms (e.g., British humour). External factors, such as friendly hosts, also encouraged Allen and Kate to use the language, and as the program progressed, they gained more self-confidence and willingness to use the language in social settings. Towards the end of SA, their L2 identities had broadened; they felt more attached to the role of being an L2 user in the host country.

After SA, Allen was more eager to enhance his confidence to develop himself as an L2 user. Due to her L2 experiences in the U.K., Kate displayed a willingness to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Allen and Kate were also able to make connections between SA and their future identity as teachers. Their developmental trajectory offers insights into individual elements (e.g., SA aims, agency) and external factors (e.g., welcoming hosts) that can impact the learning experience in short-term SA as well as L2 identity development. Further, their stories are in line with the findings of Benson et al. (2013) and Jackson (2008, 2010) in that L2 identity varies across time and space. Drawing on Benson et al.'s (2013) model of L2 identity, this study found that Allen and Kate reported development of their linguistic self-concept, including perceptions of L2 proficiency and use, emotions when using the L2, and perceptions of the self as an L2 learner and user.

### Implications

This study has implications for predeparture preparation, SA support, and post-SA reflection of short-term SA students. The participants' goals may have affected how they enacted their L2 sense of self in the host country. In predeparture orientations, instructors can enhance students' understanding of the different dimensions of L2 identity and encourage them to develop related SA goals. To further enhance learning, students can be assisted with identifying relevant language-learning strategies. For instance, they can be asked to write a preimmersion reflective essay with guided

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prompts about their SA goals and learning strategies. Based on the essay, instructors can address issues with individual students and provide guidance to support students' learning. Instructors can also provide a platform for students to share their concerns and discuss possible solutions. During SA, instructors can incorporate activities that require L2 learners to critically reflect upon their language learning attitudes and L2 identity (Jackson, 2010). For example, L2 learners can be provided with guided questions for reflective journal entries on a regular basis. This can help them make sense of their experiences and consolidate their learning. To sustain SA gains, learners can be encouraged to revisit their reflective journals and share with their peers to sustain and deepen their SA experience (Jackson, 2008).

### Acknowledgments

I thank Allen and Kate for their willingness to share their journey with me. I would also like to thank Professor Jane Jackson for her supervision of this project. My gratitude goes to two anonymous professors for the Japanese translation of the abstract. I thank the two reviewers for their insightful comments.

### Bio Data

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