

# Transitional Self in Study Abroad: An Analysis of a Japanese Female Student's Positioning in Narratives

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Study abroad is generally acknowledged as an optimal way of improving foreign language skills and gaining a set of competences required for the global market. While the outcome of study abroad is often discussed based on acquisition of those skills, recent studies highlight the complexity of identity construction from sociocultural perspectives. In this study, I explore a series of narratives shared by a Japanese female college student in order to unfold her challenges and changes over a one year period in an American community college. This study draws on community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and investment (Darvin and Norton, 2015) as theoretical perspectives in order to capture the complexity of learner identity construction through (non) participation and belonging in multiple social groups. Adapting narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997) as an analytical framework, the study reveals how she negotiated and developed her identities throughout participation in the culturally as well as linguistically distinctive communities. In particular, her investment in becoming a legitimate member of the English academic discourse community was found to be a significant experience that impacted on her sense of self. The study concludes with consideration of the significance of narrative inquiry for investigating language learner identity, particularly highlighting the researcher positionality that plays a crucial role in co-constructing and re-telling a learner's narrative.

留学は一般的に、外国語スキルの向上や、グローバル化が進む社会において必要とされる能力を身につける有効的な手段と認識されている。それ故、留学の効果自体がスキル習得を中心とし議論されることが多いが、近年その影響として、学習者のアイデンティティ構築に注目した研究も見られるようになってきている。本研究は、日本人女子大学生よって語られた1年間のアメリカ留学経験に基づくナラティブから、彼女に起きた「困難」と「変化」を読み解くものである。様々な社会的グループへの(不)参加を通しなされるアイデンティティ形成を捉える上で、実践コミュニティ (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) 及びインベストメント (Darvin and Norton, 2015) の概念を理論的視座とした。また、分析手法としてナラティブ・ポジショニング・アナリシス (Bamberg, 1997) を用い、彼女が文化的かつ言語的に全く異なるコミュニティにおいて、どのように自身を理解し、アイデンティティ構築を行ったか、他者との関わり合いに焦点を当てた。分析の結果、英語のアカデミック・ディスコースにおいて、有能なコミュニティの一員として認められることへの「投資」が彼女の自己意識に大きな変化を与えた要因となったことが明らかになった。また、本稿の結びとして、ナラティブ構築における相互性や語り直しのプロセスといった側面について言及し、研究者が「聞き手」として果たす役割について、本研究を振り返りながら、言語学習者のアイデンティティ研究におけるナラティブ・インクワイアリーの重要性を論じる。

## Keywords

language learner identity, narrative inquiry, study abroad, community of practice, researcher reflexivity

## キーワード

言語学習者アイデンティティ、ナラティブインクワイアリー、留学、実践コミュニティ、研究者の再帰性

The usual benefits attributed to study abroad are linguistic improvement, cultural experiences and personal growth for global society (Kubota, 2016). Therefore, it has been promoted in international higher education as a means of gaining those skills. Following the trend of student mobility for global market, in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), study abroad is often simply considered as a particular type of context where language acquisition occurs. Immersion within a target language is regarded as an important way of enabling language learners to obtain high proficiency. Hence, research on study abroad, especially with a focus on L2 acquisition, often has simply dealt with language skill development or communicative competence including strategic and discourse abilities (Kinginger, 2013).

However, recent studies (e.g., Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown, 2013; Block, 2007; Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Morita, 2002, 2004, 2009) have shed light on learners' subjective accounts of study abroad experience, which reveal challenges and struggles with re-conceptualizing their identities in the use of the target language in a culturally distinctive context. Rather than simply investigating the process of how learners acquire a target language, those studies have attempted to reveal the contexts including the social, historical or political discourses that are intricately linked to learners' motives and behaviors. In particular, studies of non-native English speakers' experiences in an English-dominant academic discourse communities during study abroad (e.g., Morita, 2004, 2009) underline the necessity of investigating their struggles and needs from socially-sensitive perspectives.

A year-abroad program is still a popular option for Japanese university students (Institute of International Education, 2018) as a part of their degree, however, the outcomes of the program are still judged according to its effectiveness in terms of linguistic gains. I argue that the outcomes do not simply correlate with a learner's individual differences but also depend on the intricate relationships that are "socially and historically constructed within particular relations of power" (Norton, 2013, p. 11) in host countries. Thus, in this study, I have decided to focus on a single case study with a Japanese female college student in order to uncover her challenges and changes over a year period in an American community college. It aims to contribute to expanding the concepts of study abroad from a socially-informed approach, shedding light on how her participation in English academic discourse has impacted on her identities. In the next section, I first provide key concepts related to language learner identity and study abroad research. After describing the research methodology, three stories are analyzed drawing on narrative positioning analysis originally proposed by Bamberg (1997). This study concludes by discussing the implications of longitudinal narrative research to critically examine learners' study abroad experiences from a socially-sensitive perspective.

## Literature Review

With the flourishing of social constructivist and poststructuralist perspectives, the "social turn" in applied linguistics (Block, 2003) empowered researchers to understand language learning as a situated construct, taking account of social, cultural, and temporal context. Concomitantly, learner identity also started receiving attention from applied linguists as a crucial dimension of language learning. Norton (2013) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 45). The complexity of learner identity construction has also encouraged researchers to pay attention to both the self and the contexts in which language learning is situated. In particular, socially-oriented approaches have lent their holistic and multifaceted theories to traditional individualistic perspectives of language learning.

One of the significant concepts adapted from social learning theories is the notion of community, which has been used as an analytical lens to capture the concept of self as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 414). Particularly, Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998)'s Community of Practice has been used in various studies (e.g., DePalma, 2008; Gu, 2013; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2001; Toohey, 1998) as its proponents theorize the development and acquisition of new identities through participation in social communities. The premise of community involves not only the immediate learning environment, but also imagined ones that reflect "the desire of learners to expand their range of identities and to reach out to wider worlds" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 590). The role of imagination, as discussed in the major body of research in L2 motivation (Dornyei 2005;

Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009) is prominent in understanding why a language learner is willing to acquire a target language from a psychological account. Norton (2001) suggests an alternative view of “imagined community”, which enables researchers to investigate not only observable language learning behavior in accessible environments such as language classrooms, but also a learner’s imagined social relationships in the future, which sheds lights on the recursive nature of his or her aspirations toward a target language acquisition.

Another key concept in theorizing language learner identity is investment. Interweaving social perspectives with the psychological construct of motivation, Darvin and Norton (2015) define investment as “a significant place in language learning theory for demonstrating the socially and historically constructed relationship between language learner identity and learning commitment” (p. 37). Their proposed “Model of Investment” suggests that investment is situated at the intersection of three constructs; ideology, capital and identity. They theorize that “if learners invest in a language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power” (p. 37). While language learner motivation primarily is viewed as an internal state from a binary perspective (e.g., motivated/demotivated), investment takes a more holistic approach that concerns the situatedness of learners’ positioning in relation to power relationships in various levels including personal, institutional and social. Their case studies with a female learner in rural Uganda and a male learner in urban Canada provide illustrative examples of how learners’ geographical and social locations as well as economic position enable or restrict their access to a varied range of language learning opportunities. The construct of investment “recognizes that the conditions of power in different learning contexts can position the learners in multiple and often unequal ways, leading to varying learning outcomes” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 37). Thus, the notion of investment enables researchers to investigate the complexity and fluidity of socially-oriented desire in language learning.

Following the surge of language learner identity research in applied linguistics, recent studies of study abroad investigate the complexity of identity construction and L2 use in a distinctive sociocultural context (e.g., Block, 2007; Chik and Benson, 2008; Kinginger, 2009, 2013). Benson et al. (2013) posit study abroad as “an experience in which embodied identities are relocated and reflexive/imagined identities are challenged by the need to achieve recognition for identities in an unfamiliar cultural setting” (p. 39). Whereas the traditional view of study abroad concerns the acquisition of a target language as a primary outcome, more researchers have started shedding light on sojourners’ first-hand experiences of how they are positioned in the host culture and how they interpret “the social, cultural, and linguistic practices of their host communities” (Kinger, 2013, p. 341). Benson et al. (2013) conducted a narrative inquiry with Hong Kong students who had a sojourn experience in English-speaking countries to analyze the relationship between L2 competence and second language identity development. Their study provides a comprehensive framework that explains the intertwining relationship between the gain of sociopragmatic competence and personal development. It also suggests that those two aspects of learner development powerfully impact on the learners’ self-concept. Taking a holistic approach, their framework also signifies that linguistic gain and socio-emotional dimensions of study abroad experience are interwoven into a second language sojourners’ identity development; hence, engagement in study abroad requires a deeper insight into learners’ social as well as historical backgrounds and the nature of study abroad programs, which may vary in terms of expectation, participation and interaction with local hosts.

Another important branch of research concerning identity construction in study abroad includes academic discourse socialization (Duff, 2007; Kobayashi, 2016) and academic accultura-

tion (Fox, Cheng and Zumbo, 2014; Omachinski, 2014; Peeters and Fourie, 2016). These emerging lines of research disciplines illuminate the intricate process of L2 learners' socialization and interaction with other members of an academic discourse community. Specifically, they posit that entering a new academic culture requires L2 students not only to adjust to a L2-dominant classroom but also to learn a set of social as well as literacy practices (Kobayashi, 2016). Thus, the theoretical implications of those studies put emphasis on the role of social networks including peer and teacher support in/outside classroom as indispensable in promoting newcomers' engagement and smooth transition into the target academic community.

As discussed in this section, this study takes a social-constructivist perspective on language learner identity development, shedding light on the process of 'becoming somebody new, with new patterns of participation' (Lamb, 2013, p. 37) within a new academic community in study abroad. In particular, paying closer attention to the research participant's challenges and changes in a new academic discourse community, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of her identity negotiation and development through participation in the target community. There are still few longitudinal studies that focus on Japanese college students' narrative accounts of their academic classroom experience in study abroad. This study will contribute to providing a richer understanding of specific issues that they potentially face while participating in an academic program in English-speaking countries.

## Research Methodology

### *Narrative Inquiry*

A narrative inquiry approach is employed in this study. Seeking "lifelikeness", narrative inquiry has been receiving a growing interest cross disciplinarily in social science. In particular, narrative plays a crucial role in representing "silenced voices and subjugated knowledge" (Reissman, 2008, p. 186). Barkhuizen, Benson and Chik (2014) note that narrative inquiry is considered valuable for researchers when they attempt to "capture the nature and meaning of experiences that are difficult to observe directly and are best understood from the perspective of those who experience them" (p.8). Thus, in the field of SLA, narrative research has been often used as a way of investigating language learning experience or language teaching experience to reveal the narrator's sense of self in relation to a particular sociocultural context (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2010, 2016, 2017; Rugen, 2013).

In essence, narrative involves cognitive as well as social processes, which enables narrative research to be approached multidimensionally (Barkhuizen, 2013). The process of making stories involves cognitive activities such as preserving memories, prompting reflections, connecting people with their past and present and assisting them to envision their future (Kramp, 2004). Simultaneously, a narrative must be understood in relation to "social, cultural, and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 214). As researchers (Barkhuizen, 2013; Reissman, 2008; Pavlenko, 2002) argue, narrative inquiry does not rest on factual data analysis on what has been told. Rather, the complexity of how the narrative is constructed needs to be thoroughly discussed. The criticality of in-depth analysis on the multileveled narrative context has been discussed elsewhere (Atkinson 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Barkhuizen, 2013; Reissman, 2008); yet, as Pavlenko (2002, 2007) points out, its importance is commonly ignored when researchers aim to find generalized factual data from narrative by simply adapting content analysis. Hence, adapting the analytical framework that enables me to address the form-content relationship (Barkhuizen, 2009) is necessary in my study.

## **Narrative Positioning Analysis**

While there is no single analytical approach to narrative inquiry, I find narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2003, Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) useful for the present study. The notion of positioning is initially developed by Davies and Harré (1990), which is defined as discursive practice where “selves are located as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (p. 48). Thus, positioning analysis allows researchers to make “the interactive site of storytelling the empirical ground, where identities come into existence and are interactively displayed” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 36). Bamberg (1997) has proposed three different levels of positioning which enable researchers to analyze the transitional nature of narratives from both local and global perspectives. The first level mainly concerns the contents of the story, including the characters described by a narrator, the relationship among them, and the particular context drawn in the narrative. The second level takes a closer look at the way the narrator positions him/herself to the audience. Finally, the third level aims to unfold the construct of selves produced by narrators themselves, weaving the first two levels of positioning together.

Along with positioning analysis, Bamberg's (2012) three realms of identity construction were adapted as an analytical scope in investigating the transitional process of the research participant's identity construction. Defining identity construction as “dilemmatic spaces” (Bamberg, 2012, p. 204), he sheds light on (a) sameness/difference, (b) agentive/recipient and (c) constancy/change in analyzing narrative. The first point concerns how a narrator considers the sameness or difference in relation to other characters in the narrative to claim his/her positioning. The second point refers to how a narrator makes sense of an event as a result of his/her agentic action or others. The third point focuses on the transition between present and the past as a means of meaning-making of his/her change.

Bamberg (2011, 2012) denotes the significance of positioning within those three dilemmatic spaces which appear in rather mundane conversations, as he calls “small stories” as opposed to big stories that consist of autobiographical narratives. The significance of small stories has been argued by narrative researchers (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2013; De Fina, 2013; Early & Norton, 2013; Rugen, 2013) as useful data set to investigate narrators' transitional identities in everyday interaction. Compared to big stories, which are articulated from formally structured research settings, small stories seek to obtain research participants' “moment-to-moment identity work” (Rugen, 2013, p. 201). The data used for the present study mainly entails the research participant's everyday life in study abroad, thus each story may appear as a sort of informal chat. Nevertheless, what makes a narrative as a meaningful sense-making practice is the audience's insight into “how the referential world (of what the story is about) is constructed as a function of the interactive engagement, where the way the referential world is put together points to how tellers “want to be understood” (Bamberg, 2011, p. 10). The analysis of the series of narratives in the present study, therefore values the essence of small stories to reveal how the research participant of this study, a Japanese female college student, was trying to make sense of herself in relation to specific social as well as spatiotemporal contexts. In the following section, I illustrate the detailed analytical framework.

## **Research Participant**

The research participant in this study, Emi (pseudonym) was a college student in her second year of study in the English department of a foreign language university in Japan when this research started. Born in Japan, her parents encouraged her to learn English as a foreign language at an early age. Since then, the English language became her interest as well as enjoyment. Although her English classes in junior high school as well as high school significantly

lacked the opportunities for communicative language learning, she imagined herself becoming bilingual and studying abroad in the future. I, as a learning advisor, first met Emi in April 2016. She requested a weekly advising appointment with me to talk about English learning; sometimes she had a number of grammatical questions, and other times we talked about her personal issues in English classroom including anxiety, peer pressure and her willingness to try more challenging assignments. I gradually got intrigued by the multifaceted selves she showed in the advising sessions, which encouraged me to ask her to participate in the longitudinal research while she was studying abroad.

Prior to study abroad, she was envisioning herself as a highly proficient English learner. When asked about her future self-image after completing study abroad, she described her vision as follows: “I want to be like Japanese English teachers here. I feel I get misunderstood when explaining a complicated thing. I want to speak good English so that I won’t be misunderstood by native English speakers” (Emi, August 2016, personal communication). She was also hoping to work in the hospitality industry possibly as working as a cabin attendant using English.

### ***Data Collection***

Three stories presented here are a part of a longitudinal data set from the 14-month narrative inquiry. This study mainly used a series of semi-structured interviews as the primary data set. Additionally, audio recordings of advising sessions with the research participant as well as my own advising notes were also used as supplementary data to understand how she had been making sense of herself in different spatiotemporal contexts. While each interview covered various stories including Emi’s language learning history, as aforementioned, I particularly focused on small stories. Therefore, illustrative stories were selected in the process of transcribing/re-reading stage from the three interviews that were held between October 2016 and September 2017. The first and second interviews were conducted via Skype and the third one was held in person on campus. The first two interviews used Japanese as a main language of communication; hence, once transcription was complete, it was translated into English by the researcher. In the third interview, original transcription is presented as Emi chose to speak in English. In presenting the interview transcripts in Findings, I follow Barkhuizen (2017) by breaking the stories down into lines of idea units, which was originally suggested by Gee (1986).

### ***Analytical Framework***

The process of data analysis in this study consists of three stages. The first step entailed reading and re-reading the transcripts of each interview and adding notes in the parts that signaled Emi’s identity negotiation and construction. As narrative researchers suggest, narrative data analysis requires iterative, recursive and emergent approaches (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014; Gu, 2013; Miyahara, 2015). Simultaneously, I incorporated what Miyahara (2015) suggests as a “memoing” process in the first stage to add my thoughts and theoretical background from existing literature. This process also helped me organize my analytical perspective on what has been told in the narrative. The second step followed Bamberg’s (2012) three realms of identity construction described above to investigate the dilemma within her sense of self that the research participant faced. In this stage, the guided questions “how does the research participant want the audience to understand who she is?” and “How does she make sense of herself through storytelling?” proposed in Bamberg’s (1997) positioning analysis were also helpful to pay closer attention to how she positioned herself/was positioned in relation to others and how the positioning was understood by her in the meaning-making pro-

cess. This process, once again, required constant iteration. Lastly, the findings in the first and second analytical stage were compared and analyzed to highlight the critical experiences that impacted on Emi's identities. In this stage, the contextual transition (e.g., social/academic discourse) was also considered as a crucial factor that impacted on her identity construction. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical process.

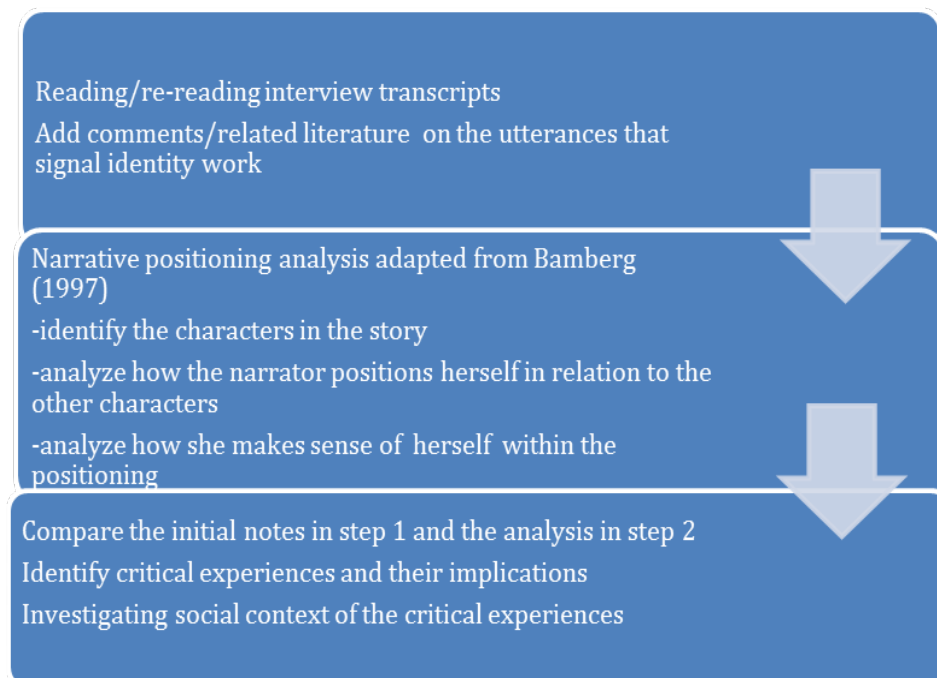


Figure 1. Process of Analysis.

While the analysis of this study draws on Bamberg's (1997) positioning analysis, I also adhere to what Riessman (2008) suggests as "hallmarks of narratives", which emphasize sequential and structural features of each story. As she warns, rigorous categorization may lead to the loss of the essence. Thus, the present study also attempts to maintain narratives as a whole rather than de-contextualizing and extracting the positioning elements.

### ***The Researcher Positionality***

One dimension of this study rests on my positionality, particularly my sociocultural background and my profession of learning advisor in terms of co-constructing narratives with Emi. The present study adopts Atkinson's (2005) situated qualitative research approach, which stresses "the quality of what is being studied from the actor's point of view (p. 50). Sharing the first language, educational background, and my own study abroad experience in an English-speaking country, my researcher positionality as an "insider" research participant has also become an important dimension of situatedness in this study. This "insider" perspective was adapted from Morita (2002, 2004) and Miyahara (2015), who also researched Japanese learners of English. Both studies, although the research contexts are different, describe the researchers' positionality as a crucial lens to delve into the learners' narratives. While I maintained my neutral position while listening to her stories, I was also aware that critical experiences she faced in the United States reminded me of my own past experiences as a learner of English.

In the research context of this study, my professional role as a learning advisor also has contributed to co-constructing the narrative with Emi. Working with her outside the class-

room, our advising session was never compulsory; in other words, it occurred when she was willing to share something with me. In addition to sharing similar backgrounds with her, my professional role as a learning advisor allowed me to reduce the researcher-researched divide by dissolving the 'rigid hierarchical power structure' (Morita, 2002, p. 71) in the expert-novice relationship in the institutional context. Rather than taking an objective approach, I took advantage of my positionality in this study in various research dimensions including data collection as well as data analysis.

Simultaneously, I paid careful attention to the delicate research dimensions of narrative inquiry because it is built upon an "inherently relational endeavor" (Josselson, 2007, p.537). As Josselson (2007, p. 538) describes, narrative researchers play a "dual role—in an intimate relationship with the participant and in a professionally responsible role in the scholarly community" Thus, in addition to following the ethical procedure provided by the researcher's institution, the series of interpretive work based on the analysis was shared with Emi in order to make sure that I was representing her voice in an ethical way.

## Findings

This section presents the analysis of the conversational narratives in the selected excerpts from three different periods of time respectively.

### *Dilemma of Being an International Student (October 2016)*

It had been about two months since Emi moved to the United States. We made time to chat via Skype after she finished her class. In this conversation, she shared various events happening in everyday life including her new friends, her host family, difficulties and excitement in school. Particularly, her experience of being an "international student" in the new academic community struck me the most.

(Y=Yamamoto; E=Emi)

1. Y How do you like your classes?
2. E Well, basically my advisor helped me choose the classes
3. that were popular among international students. Of course I am studying hard,
4. but no matter how hard I study, everyone gets good grades, which is
5. not rewarding...It's a community college, so everyone cares about grading.
6. The teacher gives everyone a good grade.
7. To me, grading is not a problem. Next semester, I am thinking about
8. taking classes that have more American students.
9. Y I see I see. So are you becoming confident of your English skill?
10. E Oh no. I really feel teachers at (her home institution)speak English
11. really clearly and slowly after taking classes here.
12. I can only understand 70 percent of what the teachers say in class here.
13. Even my English writing teacher speaks really fast.
14. She always encourages me to come ask her questions though.
15. When I have a discussion with American students, I am like "I have no idea
16. what they are saying". I haven't been able to say much in class.



17. Coming here, international students are quiet while
18. American students talk a lot. They suddenly raise their hands and start talking...

Throughout the story, Emi describes the reality in her new life within the new academic discourse. There are clear differences between what she had expected to become before studying abroad in America and how she is positioned in American classroom. She becomes aware that she is seen as one of many international students by being put in the classes that seemed to be easy to pass (line 2-4). It is intriguing to point out that Emi calls a group of international students third person singular “everyone”; moreover, her statement “Grading is not a problem” (line 7) distinguishes her motivation of learning from other international students who appeared to be desperate to get good grades. Simultaneously, she expressed her willingness to be part of the classroom that had more American student (line 8) in hoping to be equally assessed by her instructor and possibly situate herself within more academically challenging environment.

When the topic moved onto the improvement in her English skill, she started illustrating how she became a passive participant in class by comparing the nature of the community in her home institution and the new school. At a glance, the contrast seems to simply indicate her lack of English proficiency; however, more importantly, the detailed illustration of other characters in this part of the story highlights her struggle with negotiating her identity in a linguistically as well as socioculturally different context. Whereas she successfully maintained her reflexive identity as a hardworking and competent student in the community of English learners at her home institution, she marginalized herself in the new academic community, attributing to the lack of her English proficiency. Additionally, she considered herself as an international student (line 17) as opposed to American students who “suddenly raise their hand and start talking” (line 18) in the new academic discourse. This shows her ambivalent sense of being “international student”; while she was resisting against the generalization of international students earlier in the story, she also positioned herself as a part of the group by accepting her marginalized presence in classroom.

Against her imagined college life in America, this story reveals her dilemma of being an international student. Her desire to be recognized as a legitimate member of the target community was, from her perspective, rejected. Simultaneously, she became conscious of her marginal position as a non-native English speaker in the English academic discourse community.

### ***Surviving in the Classroom (February 2017)***

Three months had passed since the last interview was held. I reached Emi by email to see how she was doing as I was concerned about her situation. When we finally made time to talk via Skype, I immediately noticed that the tone of her voice was very different from the previous interview. Indeed, we talked more than one hour on that day. While there were a number of small stories in this interview, I selected the one that illustrates the dynamics of identity construction after going through linguistic as well as emotional challenges in the new academic discourse community.

19. Y How do you find the coursework in your classes?
20. E It's really challenging to be honest. The book we have been reading is for
21. American students. It's about Christianity, which I am not familiar with at all.
22. It takes ages for me to read the textbook because there are

23. way too many unknown words that American students even don't know.
24. Y Wow, that must be really difficult!
25. Have you asked American students about the coursework?
26. E Yes yes. She said "I have no idea what the book is about and
27. I really respect you reading this." (Chuckle)
28. I am also taking Public Speaking because I want to improve my presentation skill.
29. Y Public Speaking?! Wow, you are so brave. Are there a lot of international students?
30. E No, many of them are American. So I often feel pressured...
31. I don't want to fall behind everyone in the class you know.
32. Although my English has Japanese accents, at least I want to get attention from
33. American students by choosing an interesting topic. That's how I am surviving.
34. Y Do you see any change within yourself?
35. E I used to think I must become outgoing and speak a lot in front of others.
36. So I also need courage to say something in class.
37. In class, there are always outspoken students who immediately become
38. a center of the class discussion. While they are influential in class, one day,
39. I was told by my teacher: "Although you don't speak up much in discussion,
40. reading your essay, I can certainly understand that you have an insightful idea".
41. Since then, I started thinking
42. "speaking up in classroom is not the only way to be the best in class".

In this story, Emi describes how she is negotiating her identity in American-dominant classrooms. First, Emi refers to the course material that is supposed to be for "American students" (line 21). In addition to unfamiliar contents of the reading, she explains numerous amount of vocabulary she had never seen. The meaning-making she attempts to do here is not complaining the difficulty of the class; rather, she is positioning herself as a non-American student who is tackling the same academic subject as local students. Her American classmate who "respects" ("Sonkei" in Japanese) Emi (line 27) is referred as a convincing fact that she got acknowledged as a legitimate member of the classroom community. Compared to her marginal position as an international student described in the first story, the second shows how she resisted her imposed position and gained legitimacy by making effort for the class participation.

The next element of the story also represents how she is repositioning herself in the English academic discourse. While she still possessed the belief of the power of native English as opposed to non-native English, she came up with the strategy to avoid being judged as a deficit non-native English speaker and "get attention" (line 32) from American students by choosing an intriguing academic topic. As depicted in the first story, her struggle with ascribed identity as an international student had seemed to impact on how she had positioned herself in the new academic discourse at the beginning of her study; simultaneously, instead of accepting the marginal position, in this story, she is making sense of agentic attitude toward classroom participation as a way to "survive" (line 33) to be recognized as a legitimate member of the community.

Another significant experience described in this story is being accepted as a competent member in classroom by her teacher. In this story, when asked about the change within herself, she describes her imagined identity as an outgoing and talkative student (line 37) in

classroom in order to be recognized as a good student. This image is contrastive to what she illustrated herself as an international student in the previous story (line 17). However, while she was positioning herself as a passive student as opposed to outspoken local students in classroom, in the writing class, she starts talking about her writing teacher who acknowledged Emi's voice in her writing (line 37–38). This experience appears to have a powerful impact on re-envisioning herself as a competent student who can aim to be “the best in class” (line 42).

The whole story in this story represents how she changed herself against challenges in the new academic discourse. She is making sense of each classroom experience as significant elements to regain her reflexive identity, which gave her confidence to be a legitimate member of the target community. At the same time, her teacher's feedback played a crucial role in re-envisioning her positive self.

### ***Memento of Study Abroad (September 2017)***

Approximately six months had passed since I talked with Emi last time online. We tried to arrange the chat several times, but she was extremely busy with her course work. Particularly, she got an intern position at a local airport as well as a tourist office. In our email exchange, she was describing how busy her life was; it also signaled her life had been filled with excitement and new experience.

When I finally met up with Emi in person in Japan, she appeared to be different from who she had been before leaving for the United States. The dialogue presented here is informal as it was a sort of “catch up” conversation after a while. It should be noted that the language of this conversation was entirely English unlike the first two interviews as it naturally began with greetings in English. The story begins with the scene where she is opening her backpack, which is full of her coursework papers in America.

41. Y Wow, your backpack is full.
42. E I still keep all of my essays (showing Yamamoto the pieces of writing)...this is from
43. Spring quarter...and this is my CV...it's fake though (chuckle)
44. Y Oh come on, it's not fake!
45. E It's not real, but we imagined our future and wrote this.
46. How was the rest of your study?
47. Good. English class was difficult, and my grade wasn't good. But I learned a lot.
48. My teacher's feedback was very helpful. I took astronomy too, but I didn't like it.
49. When I asked him questions, he often said “Oh, you are an international student,
50. so you don't need to know this.”
51. Y That's terrible.
52. E Yes, I took the class not for grade. I just wanted to learn.
53. (Showing another piece of paper) This is also from Spring quarter.
54. Because I was interested in racism, because I was in America, we had election.
55. I have many pictures (of political protests) to show you. We went protesting
56. in a university. These protests are very common in America.
57. Y Wow. I think you went to the States during a very dynamic period.
58. E Yes...this (photos) is kind of my memento.

59. Y Actually, when you were telling me about the protest, I was really surprised.  
 60. Because you know...to me, you were definitely not a kind of the person  
 61. who goes protesting.  
 62. E Yes haha (chuckle)!  
 63. Y How did you feel about the people voicing in the protest?  
 64. E I was so impressed. I think the most powerful thing  
 65. my host mother (who took her to the protest) said “Future depends on our children  
 66. not on us. We have to show them the right thing to do.” I thought “that’s right”!  
 67. I also met so many LGBT people in Bellingham. At first, I felt really strange  
 68. to talk to those people because I was not used to communicating them in Japan.  
 69. But now, I want to encourage them.

The first thing that caught my attention while transcribing the interview was her positioning as a legitimate member of the English academic discourse community. The contrast of two classes, English and physics implicates how she resisted against the unwanted identity as a needy international student. Her statement “I just wanted to learn” also emphasizes her reflexive identity as an active student in the target community. Another remarkable change from the previous stories is her integration to the communities in the host country. Interestingly, Emi frequently used first person plural “we” when describing her experience (line 45, 54, 55) in this story while she distinguished her and other classmates, especially American students by calling them “they” in the previous stories. She continues on how she became passionate about learning racism because of the presidency election (line 54), which evoked the tension in cultural as well as racial divides at that time.

Moreover, she calls the pictures of young people protesting against racism and sexism at a university in the town she lived “my memento” (line 58), which signals her strong attachment to the community in the spatiotemporal context. Later in the interview, she described how the protest made her think about herself as minority in America. “Living in Japan, I had never felt being a minority because a lot of us come from the same cultural background. Because we are same, I never had thought my opinion would matter” (Emi, personal communication, September 2017).

At the end of this interview, I asked her what English means to her. “English is part of myself. My English is still not perfect and I am still a learner, but I use English not for learning the language but for communicating with people I like” (Emi, personal communication, September 2017). Whereas she had been longing for becoming a good speaker of English as her imagined-self prior to study abroad, a year later, she clearly envisioned herself as a legitimate member of the target academic community in America. Additionally, her identity as a Japanese learner of English no longer appeared to be a significant facet in constructing her sense of self.

Participation in the socially-constructed communities outside academic classroom has also become a salient experience that impacted on her emerging dimension of her identity construction.

## Discussion

The previous section has attempted to investigate the identity construction of Japanese learner of English in study abroad context by unpacking three small stories. The analysis on each story mainly has focused on Emi’s positioning in relation to others, which clearly illustrates

the discursive and transitional process of Emi's identity construction throughout participation in the target language communities. In this section, I discuss three key issues that impacted on Emi's identity construction.

### ***Representation of International Students in English Academic Discourse***

As seen in the first story, Emi had struggle with internalizing the positioning of international student. The representation of international students in western higher education has been problematic, labelling them as deficit or less capable (Leki, 2001; Kettle, 2017). As Emi frustrated with her teachers, there has been a strong essentialist view that generalizes international students as deficient (Kettle, 2017). In this view, as Leki (2001) points out, language ownership creates power relations that marginalize international students automatically. Not only the deficit model of international student is shared as a norm within an institution, I problematize the fact that the negative labelling even could impact on the learners' self-concept, as seen in Emi's narrative. In her case, the supportive others (Kettle, 2017) including her teacher and her host family played crucial roles in providing inclusive approaches to Emi. In particular, when her writing teacher acknowledged Emi's participation and engagement in classroom in the form of writing, Emi's diminished self-image was powerfully re-conceptualized to be positive and empowering one.

It must be recognized that this type of support is inevitable in the transitional period of identity construction in study abroad context. I echo Morita's (2004, p. 598) quote: "instead of assuming that individual students simply behave according to their abilities or cultural personal preferences, instructors should question what kinds of roles and statuses a given classroom community comprises and how those roles are shaping or being shaped by classroom interaction".

### ***Investment in English Learning***

The series of narratives from the beginning of her study abroad has captured the change in Emi's investment in language learning. Initially, her desire to study abroad stemmed from language acquisition and immersion in a local native English speakers' community, imagining herself becoming a good speaker of English who would not be misunderstood by native English speakers. As illustrated throughout the three stories, however, language acquisition became no longer the subject of her initial investment. Instead, she was working extremely hard to gain legitimacy as a competent student in the target academic discourse community.

Drawing on Davin and Norton's (2015) investment model, distinctive language ideologies in Emi's home country and host country can be seen as one of the powerful contributors to impacting on her investment in English learning. While attainment of high proficient English is symbolized as an advantageous capital for global society in Japan, she faced the position of being in a marginal position as a non-native English speaking student. In other studies such as Norton (2013), L2 learners showed their resistance to the language power by refusing to attend their language classes. In this study, Emi did so by proactively and strategically participating in the community, which eventually lead her to gain her imagined position and social capital.

At a glance, her study abroad experience may appear as a story of "highly motivated language learner". Emi was indeed a resilient and hardworking person who did not easily give up on participating in the target community. Nevertheless, from a longitudinal perspective, this study also illustrates how her investment changed over time in relation to capital, identity and ideology as Davin and Norton (2015) suggest.

## *Target-Language Mediated Subject Position as an Independent Self*

Comparing Emi's identity illustrated in each narrative, it can be found that the sense of diversity is one of the crucial factors that impacted on constructing her sense of self.

Whereas her identities prior to study abroad appeared to be "relatively fixed position in social and cultural space" (Benson et al., 2013, p. 163), the third small story depicted how her imagined community she belonged to change as a result of study abroad. The uniqueness of her narrative lies in how she reflected on her position as minority in the American academic community and intertwined her own story with other minorities' lived experience. In her narrative, the political protest she participated in with her host mother was marked as access to this sense of diversity as she described "it was my memento". Her liberated sense of self was clearly illustrated in her post-study abroad reflection (see Ota & Yamamoto, 2018), which described how she became more open-minded and sensitive to inequality in Japan. This change can be also seen as another facet of her multilingual identity development. Block (2007) describes such an emerging identity as "target-language mediated subject positions", which are found as a result of exposure to culturally as well as linguistically distinct context. Identity facets such as gender, race, social class and nationality are often challenged and re-imagined in study abroad context. Particularly, in previous studies that focus on Japanese female learners of English in western context (Block, 2007; Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Skarlin, 2001), the learners gained gender-related sense of self which lead "knowledge and ability they would take back home with them" (Block, 2007, p. 184) as outcome of their sojourn experience. In Emi's case, the sense of diversity she experienced empowered her to have a "voice", which she found invaluable hence represents who she became.

## Conclusion

This article has presented an analysis of small stories, which illustrated the dynamic identity work by a Japanese learner of English in study abroad context. Detailed attention to positioning of the characters as well as Emi's dilemmas have revealed resistance, negotiation, re-imagination and emergence of new identities. In her case, growing L2 competence certainly impacted on her positive sense of self as a user of English in the academic community, as Benson et al. (2012) propose in their framework. However, more importantly, the challenges and changes in her study abroad have remarked the dynamics of learner agency and social contexts in English academic discourse community. While Emi's initial desire to acquire English derived from her social and historical backgrounds remained the core of her reflexive identity at first, she also faced the power relations between local students and international students, which became a critical struggle in maintaining her positive sense of self. Simultaneously, she proactively tried strategic actions to gain legitimacy in the target classrooms rather than accepting the marginal position. The uniqueness of this study also lies in how Emi's English-mediated subject position as an independent woman was emerged throughout socialization with other members of the community, who powerfully empowered her to reflect on her identity in relation to the diverse world. I conclude this article by reflecting on the significance of narrative inquiry in language learner identity research.

First, as I have tried to demonstrate in my analysis, narrative inquiry unfolds not only what happened but also how it was understood and made meaning in varying spatiotemporal as well as contextual orientation of her stories. In this study, the positioning in narrative has chosen as an analytical scope to understand how the narrator, Emi was trying to make sense of her experience. Constructing a narrative as a "transitional space" (Sclater, 2003, p. 10), analyzing not only contents' of the story but also temporal as well contextual nature that agentic subjects hold is crucial. Weaving the three stories together, crucial issues such as the mar-

ginal positioning of international students, the importance of acknowledgement from other members of the community became evident in her lived experience. These are also powerful voices that allow researchers to explore more in multilingual identity in study abroad context.

Second, narrative inquiry encourages narrators to retell their stories. When I shared my preliminary analysis with her, her immediate response was “It is really interesting to look back who I was!” She was surprised at her past imagined self-comparing to her present self and felt emotional about the journey of “becoming” in the socioculturally different community. By retelling of her own narrative, she was unearthing and making sense of her past experience. This re-storying, as Barkhuizen (2009) denotes, serves as a reflective space in repositioning and reimagining her identities built on her study abroad experience. Emi indeed engaged in retelling her stories in writing as well as in presentation to disseminate her experience and empower other students to study abroad as a chance to new “self”.

Finally, narrative inquiry is, as discussed through this study, fundamentally a social practice co-constructed by a narrator and audience. As I was a primary listener of her storytelling, a whole research process required me not only to analyze how she was trying to make sense of her lived experience but also to pay closer attention to my own positionality. While delving myself into her stories, there were several powerful moments that emotionally moved me. At those points, I was departing from my position as a researcher or a learning advisor; instead, her story brought me my past self as a Japanese student in England who struggled with similar situations. The feeling of “I was there too” is fairly subjective and in my professional work, I try my best to avoid my personal view in order to encourage students to make their own decisions. In research setting, subjectivity is even considered a distractor to obtain “objectifiable” data. Nevertheless, this study enabled me to consider the role of narrative researcher in depth. I hope I clarified my positionality enough to help readers to understand Emi’s narrative as socially constructed products rather than a simple summary of the incidents in her study abroad experience.

This study has rested on a single research participant’s perspective; hence, as clarified earlier, the aim of this research does not intend to generalize the findings to represent study abroad experience. Nevertheless, it is my hope that this study encourages researchers to take an in-depth longitudinal case study approach in order to unfold the complexity of study abroad experience. The collection of such studies will help understanding learners as “multifaceted social beings” (Miyahara, 2015) in socioculturally distinct discourse communities. Simultaneously, it should be reminded that narrative practice itself serves as a social space for them to disseminate their lived experiences.

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## Review Process

This paper was blind peer-reviewed by members of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind review.*)

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