

Second Language Identity in Narratives of Study Abroad

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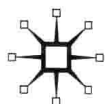
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Introduction: Narrative, Second Language Identity and Study Abroad

The title of this book includes three terms that have opened up new and exciting areas in second language learning research: *narrative*, *second language identity*, and *study abroad*. In this introduction, we explain how these three concepts come together in the book. Second language identity and study abroad are discussed briefly here and in more detail in Chapters 2–3. In this chapter, we also outline the range of study abroad programmes available to Hong Kong students. Our discussion of narrative is situated first within the idea of second language identity and, later, in the context of the design of the *Second language identities and study abroad* research project on which this book is based. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the structure and content of the book.

Second language identity and study abroad

Second language identity and study abroad are relatively new areas of interest in second language learning research. Second language identity, the main focus of this book, is an especially important area in which researchers have begun to reconceptualize the processes and outcomes of second language learning. Research on second language identity explores the ways in which learning a new language changes the learner as a person. This is in contrast to approaches that emphasize the acquisition and accumulation of language knowledge and skills. A person who knows something of a second language is a different person to the one who previously knew nothing of it. Knowing a second language influences both the learner's sense of self and the possibilities for self-representation through language use. From this perspective, the acquisition of language knowledge and skills remain important, but it

is viewed not as the end point of second language learning, but as the starting point for the identity developments that second language learning entails.

There is still a good deal of debate on what exactly 'identity' and 'second language identity' mean. In this book, we begin from a social view of identity as a dialectical relationship between the 'inner' and 'outer' aspects of the self, involving our own sense of who we are, the ways in which we represent ourselves, and how we are represented and positioned by others. Our working definition of second language identity incorporates this view of identity and covers any aspect of it that is related to the knowledge and use of a second language. This implies that second language identity is a complex, multidimensional construct and that what we see of a person's identities varies according to the context. We have multiple identities, and knowledge of a second language adds to the possibilities for being, or being seen as, a different person in different contexts. Nevertheless, we believe that people strive for coherence in the development of their identities. The development of second language identity is, therefore, largely a matter of incorporating experiences of second language learning and use into an ongoing sense of who we are. Second language learning is often a long-term process. Therefore, we are mainly interested in the ways in which second language identities develop over time and in response to new contexts of language learning and use. The main aims of this book are, first, to identify and model the different dimensions of second language identity (Chapter 3) and, second, to examine developments along these dimensions that can be observed in study abroad (Chapters 4–8).

Interest in study abroad is growing rapidly and, seemingly, in proportion to the growth of opportunities for overseas travel. In a recent overview, Kinginger (2009) describes how approaches to study abroad research have evolved from quantitative comparisons of the language learning gains of study abroad and 'at home' students to qualitative investigations of language learning and use in study abroad settings. In recent work, an interest in issues of identity has emerged alongside the shift in focus from study abroad participants 'in the mass' to the situated experiences of individual students in particular contexts of study abroad. For the most part this work has looked at how factors of social identity, notably gender, influence language learning process and outcomes. Our research builds on this work, but shifts the emphasis to the influence of study abroad experiences on students' identities. Our research began from the observation that a period of study abroad often transforms students' views of themselves as learners and users of

a second language. Many of the Hong Kong students whom we have worked with, for example, return from a semester at an overseas university with the feeling that they are no longer 'learners' of English. They feel that they have become 'users' of English, who can best improve their competence not by studying, but simply by continuing to use the language in their everyday lives. From our perspective, this represents a significant development in their second language identities: a shift from one way of being a person who knows a second language to another. The long-term influence of such identity developments may also be much greater than any increase in the students' language knowledge and skills if it leads to new ways of learning and using the second language.

Comparative studies of language gains treat study abroad as a context for second language acquisition and are mainly concerned with the extent to which this context facilitates acquisition. Our research also treats study abroad as a context for second language learning and use, but it is more concerned with the *change* in context that study abroad implies. From this perspective, the influence of study abroad has a historical aspect and can only be fully understood in the context of a student's longer-term experiences of language learning. For students who study abroad after many years of learning a second language in the classroom in their home country, the question of which context best facilitates acquisition is of less interest than the potential impact of studying in a *new* and very different context to the one they are accustomed to. We are, in other words, interested in study abroad as a potentially 'critical' experience that opens up second language identities to change.

Like second language identity, study abroad is a difficult term to define. Our working definition covers any period spent overseas, for which study is part of the purpose. As study abroad does not necessarily involve the use of a second language (as, for example, when English-speaking students from the United States study abroad in the United Kingdom), we are more narrowly interested in study abroad where the main purpose is either the study *of* a second language or study *through* the medium of a second language. The idea that study need only be a part of the purpose of study abroad, however, highlights other possible purposes, including the personal, intercultural and academic developments that are emphasized in programmes that do not involve a second language. For second language study abroad programmes, we therefore posit a continuum of outcomes ranging from improvements in language competence to personal development. This continuum is the basis of the model of second language identity development that we propose in Chapter 3. In Chapters 4–6, we endeavour to show that a

good part of this continuum is occupied by developments that involve second language identity development.

Research on study abroad tends to be shaped by the kinds of programme that are most typical of the region where the research is located. Much of the research to date has been conducted in North America and Europe and involves English-speaking students of foreign languages from these parts of the world. This study redresses the balance by focusing on Hong Kong students, for whom study abroad is most often a matter of studying or studying through the medium of English, which is not simply a foreign language but also a local and international language which is vital to progress in their academic and professional careers. There is a growing range of study abroad opportunities for Hong Kong students of all ages, including organized programmes that last from one or two weeks to individually arranged programmes lasting several years. Longer periods of study abroad are usually undertaken in order to obtain academic or professional qualifications, but there are now also many shorter programmes organized by commercial providers and education institutions.

The inclusion of case study narratives that represent the variety of study abroad opportunities for Hong Kong students is a unique feature of this book, which allows us to investigate both the influence of study abroad on second language identities and the ways in which it varies according to programme type and individual differences. Relationships between programme type and second language identity development are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, while Chapter 8 examines how individual differences may lead to very different outcomes for students who participate in the same programme.

Study abroad in Hong Kong

It is often observed that the knowledge base on study abroad is limited by the range of programme types that appear in published research. In her comprehensive review of literature on language learning and study, Kinginger (2009: 9) points to the preponderance of North American studies and to the exclusion of students for whom 'cross-border education is driven less by a mutual understanding approach than by economic striving or by a dearth of opportunity for higher education at home'. For students from the Asia-Pacific region, Kinginger argues, 'the main modality of cross-border education is the acquisition of a full degree on a fee-paying basis'. While this book aims to expand the range of contexts in which experiences of language learning in study abroad

have been investigated into this area, we believe that Kinginger's view of study abroad in the Asia-Pacific region needs to be approached with a degree of caution.

Research on study abroad and language learning has, in fact, focused on three main contexts. The North American studies that Kinginger (2009) refers to are mainly programmes of one semester or less, designed for university students who travel overseas either in groups or individually. Programmes studied in the language learning literature are mainly for foreign language students or students who take a second language study abroad programme as part of a non-language degree. Although much of this research focuses on language outcomes, cultural goals may also be important, as university-level foreign language education is often driven more by goals of cultural understanding than it is by any pressing need for the students to know the languages they learn. As Kolb (2009: 49) puts it, the promotion of study abroad in the United States is largely a matter of 'countering tendencies towards U.S. isolationism and an attitude that foreigners "can do everything *our* way and in *our* language"'.

The second context appears mainly in European literature that discusses various kinds of university exchange programmes that have been developed in the context of policies to promote educational mobility, multilingualism and European integration. European research on study abroad originates in studies of one-year 'residence abroad' programmes for modern language students from the United Kingdom (Alred and Byram, 2002, 2006; Coleman, 1997, 2005) and has evolved into studies of a variety of cross-European exchange arrangements (Coleman, 1998; King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The goals of these programmes are often similar to those of North American programmes, although the literature conveys a sense that the purpose of European study abroad is often the acquisition of advanced linguistic and intercultural skills that are highly valued in the new integrated Europe. In contrast to the North American literature, there is also more emphasis on intercultural outcomes, which are often seen as being interwoven with linguistic and intercultural outcomes.

The third context mainly involves speakers of English as a second language who travel overseas either to study English or to obtain academic qualifications through the medium of English. Research in this area is perhaps most characteristic of the Asia-Pacific region, as Kinginger (2009) suggests, although this type of study abroad is characteristic of many parts of the world in which English is used as a second language, including Europe. There have been a number of studies of English

language study abroad for Hong Kong students (Barkhuizen and Feryok, 2006; Benson, 2012; Bodycott and Crew, 2001; Chik and Benson, 2008; Crew and Bodycott, 2002; Jackson, 2008, 2010; Lee, 2009; Tang and Choi, 2004). These studies tend to show that, while study abroad to gain academic qualifications is part of the picture (Chik and Benson, 2008), most Hong Kong-based research deals with programmes that are similar to those in the North American and European literature in most respects other than the target language. We would argue, therefore, that the imbalance in research on study abroad is not only geographical; it is also a matter of focus, which has mainly fallen on university-based programmes in various parts of the world. There is a corresponding lack of research on shorter programmes for younger learners and on study abroad programmes that are organized by individual students themselves, whether at university or school level.

A wide range of study abroad programmes is available to Hong Kong students. A recent household survey report showed that 75,000 Hong Kong students below the age of 25 were attending courses of one year or longer overseas in 2009–10, with the vast majority studying in English-speaking countries. Of these students, 68 per cent were studying at post-secondary level and 30.4 per cent at secondary level. Improving English proficiency was the most frequently cited reason for studying abroad by family members (40.5 per cent), followed by becoming more independent (35.6 per cent) (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). These results were similar to those reported in an earlier survey (Census and Statistics Department, 2002) which suggests that numbers for long-term overseas education have remained stable over the last 10 years, probably due to its cost relative to local incomes. A separate survey showed that 68,000 Hong Kong students travelled overseas in 2002; 11,900 travelled on educational tours, including 3,800 on tours arranged by schools (Census and Statistics Department, 2003).

There are now a number of overseas study 'agencies' operating in Hong Kong which help to place students in school and university programmes overseas and also offer overseas language courses and study tours. One of these organizations claims to represent more than 2,000 overseas institutions and to place more than 1,500 students every year. Most local universities now encourage their students to participate in credit-bearing exchange semesters in overseas universities and offer various kinds of non-credit-bearing overseas experience programmes. The American Field Service places more than 100 secondary school students in one-year overseas exchanges annually. Many secondary schools and some primary schools offer short-term exchanges with partner

schools, or encourage their students to participate in overseas study tours. Many of the shorter programmes have more focus on cultural activities than language learning. Recently advertised short programmes included a 'Hong Kong Certificate of Education oral examination study tour' in London and Cambridge, an 'English language and culture tour' in Oxford, a 'university English camp' in Toronto, a 'European culture and English learning tour' in Malta, a 'Boston hip-hop dance camp', and a 'Manchester United soccer flying to your dream tour'. In view of these observations, Hong Kong appears to be an ideal site for research on study abroad, and in the study on which this book is based we examine narratives of students involved in a wide range of different study abroad programmes.

Narrative inquiry

The idea of narrative is central to this book as it informs both the methodology of the research on which it is based and the way in which we report its findings. We describe the study as a narrative inquiry study because it uses students' narratives of study abroad experiences as data and also because the writing of case study narratives was a crucial stage in the data analysis. The importance of narrative in the research process is also reflected in our decision to begin each of Chapters 4–8 with two complete case study narratives.

Bruner (1986: 11) writes of two basic modes of thought, each providing a distinctive way of ordering experience: 'a good story and a well-formed argument'. Each mode convinces in its own way. Arguments appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof, while stories convince the reader or listener of their 'lifelikeness' by appealing to criteria of verisimilitude. Bruner calls these two modes of thought 'paradigmatic' and 'narrative'. The narrative mode is older and more deeply rooted in everyday thinking. The paradigmatic mode is more recent and is closely associated with the development of European rationality and intellectuality. Academic research typically leans towards paradigmatic thinking, but there are also traditions in the psychological and social sciences in which narrative appears both as an object of research and as a way of presenting research findings. Freud's psychoanalytical studies and the early work of the Chicago School of Sociology are notable instances of early 20th century narrative research. More recently, there has been a considerable growth of interest in narrative inquiry in a variety of academic disciplines (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008; Webster and Mertova, 2007),

including second language teaching and learning research (Barkhuizen, 2011; Barkhuizen, Benson and Chik, 2013; Benson and Nunan, 2005; Johnson and Golombek, 2002; Kalaja, Menezes and Barcelos, 2007; Nunan and Choi, 2010).

This turn to narrative methods reflects a view that paradigmatic methods often lead to conclusions that are divorced from lived reality and conveyed through forms of argument that fail to convince because they lack the quality of 'lifelikeness' that we expect of a good story. Narrative methods are especially valuable when we want to capture the nature and meaning of experiences that are difficult to observe directly and are best understood from the perspectives of those who experience them. Narratives played an important role in the study on which this book is based because experiences of second language identity development in study abroad cannot be observed directly. Our decision to rely upon students' narratives of their experiences, rather than observational methods, was, therefore, also a decision to focus on the meaning of these experiences for the students themselves.

Identity is a prominent theme in narrative research because of the links that have been made between 'self-making' narratives (Bruner, 2001) and the development of personal identities. The stories we tell about our lives, both to ourselves and to others, define who we are and they are largely constructed out of interpreted experience. The importance of narrative to identity was recently highlighted in S.J. Watson's best-selling novel *Before I Go to Sleep* (Watson, 2011). Its narrator and central character Christine suffers from a rare form of amnesia which causes her to wake each morning with no memory of her adult life. She retains memories as long as she is awake, but they are erased whenever she sleeps. As Christine loses her memories, she also loses her sense of identity. Waking each day without a life story to tell her who she is, she reconstructs her identity daily in response to other people's accounts of her life. By recording the fragments of her life in a journal, however, she begins to build a lasting and coherent sense of self and agency. Christine is a fictional character, but her fictional predicament highlights the sense in which the stories we tell about our lives are crucial to our sense of who we are.

If narrative plays an important role in the construction of personal identities, its role may be even more important in the construction of second language identities. One school of thought holds that any engagement with a second language has an impact on identity, while another holds that this is only true of the deeper levels of engagement that occur; for example, as a consequence of migration. More generally,

we might say that deep engagement in second language learning and use entails a certain ‘destabilization’ of established language identities which is likely to provoke narrative identity work. In our research, we have found that people very often have quite detailed and complex stories to tell about how they have learned a second language. The significance of these stories appears to lie in the coherence and sense of direction they lend to what might otherwise be myriad unconnected events. Learners’ stories also often weave the experience of learning a second language into the tellers’ personal lives and identities. Through narrative research, we have also learned to question the assumption that anyone who happens to find themselves in a language class is automatically a ‘language learner’. People who have stories to tell about how they have learned a second language, however, are second language learners and users in a subjective sense, and their stories define the particular and individual senses in which they subscribe to language ‘learner’ and ‘user’ identities. They also help define their broader identities as people who know more than one language in contrast to those (including their previous selves) who know only one.

At its fullest extent, the story of how a person has learned a second language is the story of their ‘language learning career’ (Benson, 2011), which is invariably a complex composite of smaller stories that focus on particular phases, processes and events. A period of study abroad, for example, is often seen as a phase or event (depending on its duration) within a much longer process of learning a second language. From a narrative perspective, however, the significance of a period of study abroad often lies in its difference from the period of study at home that has led up to it. In most cases, it signifies not only a new setting and new social relations, but also different ways of learning and using language, which give cause for reflection and narrative identity work. In this sense, a period of study abroad often represents a ‘critical experience’ within the story of a language learning career, or a story within a story that signals a change in self-understanding. If self-narratives play an important role in the construction of second language identities, narratives of critical experiences can also be seen as key points in their development.

The second language identities and study abroad project

This book is based on a three-year research project that investigated the development of Hong Kong students’ second language identities through individual case studies of their study abroad experiences.

The project produced 48 individual case study narratives, of which 10 are included in this book. The participants in the study fell into six main categories:

1. Secondary school students participating in two 10-day overseas exchange programmes organized by their school
2. First-year university undergraduates participating in a six-week overseas study tour
3. Second-year university English teacher education majors participating in a credit-bearing overseas 'immersion semester'
4. University students who independently organized exchange semesters in overseas universities
5. Students who were studying for undergraduate degrees overseas
6. Students who were studying for postgraduate degrees overseas

Reflecting the value of English in Hong Kong, all the participants were studying abroad in order to improve their English or to study through the medium of English, although this was often not their only reason for studying abroad. Their destinations included Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Germany, Norway and Korea.

Narrative plays a double role in the case studies. First, the aim of the data collection was to elicit narratives of each student's experiences through interviews and written accounts. Second, in the first phase of the data analysis, these narratives were written up more formally by the researchers, who then verified their versions of the participants' stories with the participants. These 1,500–2,000-word narratives then became data for the second phase of analysis, in which themes related to second language identity were identified and a model of second language identity constructed. In a third phase of analysis, comparisons were made among the narratives, in order to draw conclusions about the impact of different kinds of programmes and individual differences.

Data collection

Allowing for some variation according to the length of period abroad and the availability of participants, the procedures for data collection for each participant were as follows.

1. An interview with the project research assistant before they departed. The interview lasted around one hour and covered the participant's language learning history and expectations for study abroad.