7 ICLICE 2017-057 Chika Kitano

Discussing 'Third Space' in the Process of Japanese Short-Term Study Abroad Students' Identity Negotiation

Chika Kitano
Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University,
Yamadaoka, Suita-City, Japan
bhhqb832@yahoo.co.jp

ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which Japanese study abroad (SA) students negotiate their identities through encounters with various English speakers including what is called 'non-native' speakers; in particular, Asian international students. This study is comprised of semi-structured interviews with nine Japanese SA students who participated in the same short-term study abroad programme in the UK. Specifically, this study focuses on two interviewees whose ways of communicating with various English speakers vividly contrasted with other interviewees. This study found that Japanese SA students tended to imagine their future friendship groups abroad as consisting of idealised 'native' English speakers, while there is a high probability that Japanese SA students encounter various English speakers including so-called 'non-native' speakers during study abroad. This study also shows that a new positioning of SA students in study abroad environment, which can be analytically approached with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'Third Space', considerably functioned in the interaction with various English speakers. By re-theorising 'Third Space' as physical and theoretical spaces which allow one to observe the multifaceted relationship among English speakers, this study suggests that deep intercultural communication prior to the sojourn can be a pivotal factor in enabling ease for short-term SA students to step into a new position in 'Third Space'

Keywords: Identity, Short-term Study Abroad, 'Third Space', Native/Non-Native Speakers, Japanese Students, English Language Learning

Introduction

Study abroad has been widely promoted since it has been regarded as beneficial for students to gain language proficiency and cultural competence (Wilkinson, 2000). The Japanese government has placed considerable emphasis on the study abroad experience as a means to gain language proficiency and cultural competencies, with evaluations of acquisition based on quantitative surveys comprising of pre- and post – tests. On the other hand, there have been only a few discussions regarding multifaceted experiences of SA students in their language learning process in depth. Regarding identity issues, only a few researchers in Japan (e.g. Suehiro, 2006; Fujita, 2008; Takahashi, 2013) have conducted longitudinal interviews with Japanese SA students. However, these researchers have mainly focused on the binary relationship between Japanese SA students and their interlocutors who are the so-called 'native' English speakers in the SA students' host countries. The interaction between Japanese SA students and the so-called 'non-native' speakers whom Japanese SA students inevitably encounter and communicate with through study abroad in a globalised society has not been adequately discussed.

Objectives

Thus, rather than looking at the binary relationship between Japanese SA students and the so-called 'native' speakers, this study focuses on the discursive relationship between Japanese SA students and various English speakers, including not only the so-called 'native' speakers but also 'non-native' speakers. In particular, the relationship between Japanese SA students and other international students who are from Asian regions are the primary focus of investigation in this study. In this complex relationship, this study explores how Japanese SA students negotiate their identities. Although some writers have insisted that a short-term study abroad programme is not sufficient for learners' identity (re)construction (see Medina-López-Portillo, 2004, Engle, L. and Engle, J., 2003), this study draws attention to variations in the short-term study abroad experiences in depth and highlights the possibilities of short-term study abroad experiences arguing that they can act as opportunities for learners to negotiate their identities.

Research Questions

The main research questions of this study are threefold. Firstly, this study investigates how Japanese SA students construct images of desired English speakers. In particular, this investigation is narrowed down to two specific questions: 1) How are the concepts of 'native' speakers and 'non-native' speakers linked to the construction of the images of desired English speakers? 2) How do Japanese SA students regard Asian international students as English speakers? Secondly, this study seeks to identify how the images of desired English speakers influence Japanese SA students in the process of identity negotiation through study abroad. Finally, by examining Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'Third Space', this study scrutinises the ways in which Japanese SA students explore the position of 'Third Space' when a binary relationship between Japanese SA students and the so-called 'native' English speakers is contested in the English language learning process.

Theoretical Framework

In order to examine the discursive relationship among various English speakers, this study discusses the concept of 'Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994) as a strategic place in which to negotiate identities. The idea of 'Third Space' was primarily proposed in his '*The Location of Culture*' (1994), where, as a background to his idea, Bhabha argues that "we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Thus, 'Third Space' has been generally interpreted in cultural studies as a new location or space in which people find themselves when trying to cross cultural boundaries.

Based on his idea, this study defines 'Third Space' as physical and theoretical space which enables other spaces to emerge when people encounter a new environment. This concept is particularly useful for this study, which examines study abroad settings. This is because a study abroad setting is a new place for learners to physically and theoretically move across various boundaries such as national borders, religion and social customs. In other words, static or fixed cultural norms can be contested in such settings. 'Third Space' challenges the idea of static or fixed culture and identity. By examining 'Third Space', this study scrutinises the multifaceted experiences of Japanese SA students rather than testing for the acquisition of competencies skills, the latter often drawing on a static view of culture.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study seeks to look at the process of negotiation and (re)construction of each interviewee's identity. Thus, this study was conducted arbitrarily on a small scale using individual semi-structured interviews between the author and interviewees. Nine interviewees were collected from a national Japanese university in which the academic level is very high. In the process of recruiting the interviewees, I took part in a guidance session of a four-week study abroad programme in the UK, the aims of which were for participants to improve their English skills and to gain credits during the period spent abroad. This study abroad programme, from 18th August to 19th September 2014, was established and supported by the national university. Three male students and six female students voluntarily accepted my offer. They ranged in age from 19 to 21, with an average of 19.6 years. The interviewees were basically then tracked for five months from July in 2014 to October in 2014 in their pre-sojourn period in Japan, during their sojourn in the UK and after their sojourn back in Japan. One interview session in the pre-sojourn, during-sojourn and after sojourn period, each lasting between around fifteen minutes and one hour, were carried out in the cafeterias and open spaces of the home university in Japan and the host university in the UK. All narrative data were audio recorded and translated from Japanese to English by the author. Half of all interviewees provided their diaries during the sojourn.

Specifically, this study focuses on two interviewees among all interviewees whose ways of communicating with various English speakers vividly contrast. Table 1 shows the background information for each interviewee.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Interview date	Length of interview	Interview site	Types of data
Kaito	19	Male	(1) 11th July, 2014 (2) 20th August, 2014 (3)14th October, 2014	(1) 53 min (2) 16 min (3) 61 min	(1)cafeteria in Japan (2)open space in the UK (3)cafeteria in Japan	Interview Diary
Yuta	19	Male	(1) 10th July, 2014 (2)20th August, 2014 (3)8th October, 2014	(1)42 min (2)14 min (3) 57 min	(1)cafeteria in Japan (2)open space in the UK (3)cafeteria in Japan	Interview Diary

Table 1. Information about the interviewees

Positionality

During the interviews, I simultaneously tried to position myself as a student rather than a researcher in order not to create distance between us. For example, I introduced personal information, including my university major, working experience and study abroad experience in the UK and Australia. I advised them that they could talk freely about whatever they wanted to discuss and that they were equally able to avoid any topics they did not wish to talk about. It is not completely possible to see their perceptions from their individual viewpoints,

but I tried to further understand the exact meanings of what they said by paraphrasing their responses in my own words rather than merely listening to them in a passive way.

Literature Review

Desired English Speakers Imagined by Japanese Learners

Firstly, this study explores how Japanese students construct images of English speakers. By looking at the characteristics of the English language and the study abroad settings in English-speaking countries, this study identifies the ideal and desired English speakers for Japanese SA students.

The unique status of the English language is its rapid and worldwide spread in both global and local contexts. Bolton sums up a plethora of terminology: "English as an international (auxiliary) language, global English(es), international English(es), localized varieties of English, …" (Bolton, 2006, p. 240). It can be said that English language learners will necessarily be confronted by various Englishes and English speakers in study abroad settings. Although there are varieties of Englishes and English speakers, Takahashi notes that "in most *ryugaku* [*study abroad*] magazines and *ryugaku* articles in women's magazines, the choices of language (usually English) *ryugaku* destinations are often limited to five or six major English-speaking nations, almost always including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand" (2013, p. 44). Referring to Kachru, B. B.'s idea of "three concentric circles" (1992): the Inner Circle (English as a Native Language), the Outer Circle (English as a Second Language), and the Expanding Circle (English as a Foreign Language), Takahashi adds that "the media discourse of *ryugaku* functions to legitimatise the ownership of English by the inner circle countries" (2013, p. 44). One study abroad magazine typically portrays the characteristics of these countries, saying: "Canada; you can learn beautiful English without an accent. The United Kingdom; you can learn elegant Queen's English" (Diamond-Big Co, Ltd., 2007, p. 30-31). In addition, Kubota points out that the Japanese views are "affected by the world view of native English speakers" (1998: 295). From the research and media discourse, it can be said that there is an assumption that so-called 'native' speakers are expected to be idealised English models with whom Japanese SA students can communicate in SA settings, although it has been pointed out that the term 'native' speaker is problematic because of the lack of adequate resources to define who exactly are presented as 'native' speakers (Davies, 2002). It can be said that the concept of the so-called 'native' speaker itself has, to a large extent, been constructed socially.

In reality, the number of Asian students studying abroad has been increasing over the decades. As a consequence, there is a high probability that Japanese SA students will encounter Asian international students in English-speaking countries. Thus, there is not only a binary relationship between the so-called 'native' speakers and Japanese SA students but there are also complex relationships between various Englishes and English speakers in SA settings. It is necessary to consider the complexities, especially in the case where the target language is English.

Third Space

Then, taking the view that identity is changeable in social interaction through linguistic practice (e.g. dialogue and negotiation in language) with others as poststructuralists insist (Norton and Toohey, 2002), this study tries to define the concept of 'Third Space', which is inextricably linked with identity negotiation.

In overseas study settings, some researchers theorise that the term 'Third Space' – also known as 'third place' or 'third culture perspective' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Ting-Toomey,

1999) – has a similar meaning to the terms 'in-betweenness', 'living in the middle' and 'hybridity'. Regarding the terms 'in-betweenness', 'living in the middle' and 'hybridity', 'Third Space' has been analytically employed to describe situations in which individuals are confronted with different cultural contexts. There is the view which theorises 'Third Space' as a productive or creative space to which new perspectives are brought for learners (see Ting-Toomey, 1999, Irving and Young 2002, Jackson, 2008).   As with this interpretation, this study also takes the view that 'Third Space' is accorded a more positive position which is a 'potentially empowering position' (Jackson, 2004, p. 55).

Moreover, the concept of 'Third Space' challenges the essentialised binary categories or polarities as English insists that " 'Third Space' serves as a rebuttal or corrective to regulating, rigid views and suggests that identity is a complex, ambivalent, negotiable, and somewhat contested space where polarities do not apply" (2005, p.87).   Especially, for Japanese SA students, it can be worth examining how 'Third Space' functions in study abroad settings. This is because the study abroad settings can be the place where the binary relationship between Japanese SA students and the so-called 'native' English speakers can be contested.

Findings

Considering the discursive perspectives in terms of the interviewer-respondent relationship, individual narrative was collected and analysed thematically in this research. The interviewees' narrative data was divided into three phases: pre-sojourn, during-sojourn and after sojourn.

Pre-sojourn
How are the concepts of 'native' speakers and 'non-native' speakers linked to the construction of the images of English speakers?

When giving their reasons for their decisions to take part in the study abroad programme, although not quite as strongly, both interviewees were motivated to learn English by emotional identification with English-speaking countries rather than by simple practical concerns such as language improvement for career enhancement. Their intrinsic motivations are divided into to two types; one connected to the idea of the so-called 'native' speakers and the other connected to the idea of various Englishes. For instance, in the former case, Kaito was motivated to take part in the study abroad programme in order to acquire 'authentic ('*nama no*' in Japanese) English' (Kaito Interview, 11th July, 2014). On the other hand, one of Yuta's motivations to study abroad was "to speak various languages, such as English" (Yuta Interview, 10th July, 2014). When giving his goals in the UK, he said: "I want to improve my English. I want to talk with various people and improve my speaking ability, not just my reading skill" (Yuta Interview, 10th July, 2014). It can be said that Yuta's motivation to go to the UK was not restricted to the English language which is spoken by 'native' speakers and English worlds.

How do the interviewees regard Asian international students?

In order to clarify how the interviewees perceive Asian international students they will encounter in study abroad settings, they were asked about the images of Asia and Asians in comparison with those Japanese and Japan.

Yuta felt that Japanese was "kind of Asian" and "Japan is a westernised country" (Interview, 10th July, 2014). On the other hand, although Kaito was unsure as to which group, Asia or the West, Japan belonged, he finally provided evidence of an ethnocentric view and refused to identify with other Asians, criticising their social manners in general.

> Kaito   : In this respect, I hope, I want Japan to be at the top. Well.
> Chika   : You mean you want Japan to be at the top in terms of manners?
> Kaito   : Yes, not only their manners, but… I also think Japan has been at the top so far. Japan held second place economically, until recently. I want Japan to keep winning.

(Kaito   Interview, 10th July, 2014)

From his narrative, it can be said that he judged other Asian countries from his own monocultural viewpoint, referring to the idea of manners, which are strongly linked to static cultural norms.

As one of the reasons why the interviewees had different images of various English speakers, including desired English speakers and Asian, this study also focuses on the interviewees' intercultural experiences in the pre-sojourn period. The interviewees were divided into two: the one who had previous experience of close interaction with the people from different countries and the other who did not.

As the former, Yuta had close relationships with his foreign friends although he did not have any prior experiences of going abroad. Yuta was also involved in the activities of his club to support international students from various backgrounds, such as Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Canada, America, Sweden and the UK. His best friend there was a Korean student. He often participated in his club and enjoyed talking with the international students. According to his narrative, they were "all really good friends" of his (Interview, 27th July, 2013).

Kaito, on the other hand, had not had in-depth interaction with people from different countries. Even though Kaito had many experiences of going abroad for short periods of time, he only had limited encounters with international contacts, including both the so-called 'native' speakers and 'non-native' speakers. Kaito looked back on the home where he stayed for two weeks in the US: "Many people accepted international students as a kind of business. And, my host family as well. When I went back home, we didn't talk so much. Just a little talking. (…) Sometimes, I had dinner alone" (Interview, 11th July, 2014). Also, he did not take part in any activities that involved communicating with either the so-called 'native' speakers or 'non-native' speakers in the pre-sojourn period in Japan.

Taking their narratives into consideration, it seems that their intercultural experiences prior to the sojourns were different, not only on a quantitative level (e.g. how often they had previously been abroad; how many countries they had previously visited, and so on), but also on a qualitative level (e.g. the kinds of relationships constructed and so on).

During the Sojourn
How do the images of desired English speakers influence the interaction with various English speakers in the classroom?

In both classrooms in the UK, there were only Japanese students and Asian international students. Kaito and Yuta took different classes. In his class, Kaito tended to judge the English skills of the international students from his perspective. When he talked about his classmate, he said that the Asian international students' "English grammar was terrible" (Interview, 14th October, 2014) although he felt that his English listening skills were not good compared with those of his classmates.

> Kaito   : You know, when the subject is 'he' the next verb is not 'do' but 'does'.

Chika   : Yes.
Kaito   : But, as I heard [my friend speaking], he (an Asian student) was
                 wondering what it should be for 'he', talking for at least 10 minutes. I felt
                 like, *What?* ... But, he could speak English …It was really strange.
(Kaito   Interview, 14th October, 2014)

In the case of Yuta, he held different attitudes towards his Asian classmates. He focused on the frequency of utterance of his Asian classmates.

Yuta   : There was a Kazakhs who could speak English well, he often
           spoke up and frequently gave his opinions in our class. (…)
Chika : How did you feel seeing them, at first?
Yuta   : I thought I want to speak in the class.
Chika : Well, you mean you were motivated?
Yuta   : I thought I need to speak like them. So, I tried to speak English.
(Yuta Interview, 8th October, 2014)

He changed his attitude in class, reflecting other Asian students' attitude. Compared with Kaito, he remembered the positive aspects of other Asian students' English performances, although there was almost no difference between Kaito and Yuta in terms of their English level. Their IETLS' scores were both 5.0 at that time.

How do the images of desired English speakers influence the interaction with various English speakers outside the classroom?

During the sojourn, all interviewees stayed in a dormitory with only Japanese students. Kaito in particular, had a strong commitment to his Japanese friends. Almost every day, he went shopping for dinner and cooked with his Japanese friends after classes. In addition, every weekend, he went on trips with his Japanese friends. According to his narrative, he was satisfied and secure with being in a Japanese group.

On the other hand, Yuta made a different choice, even though he was in a similar environment to Kaito. Although he had to stay in a dormitory with Japanese students, he tried to find places where he was likely to encounter and communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds. For example, he often hung out with his Asian classmates. One day, they went to a seaside and had sea food together.

Yuta   : It was one of my best memories (in the UK).
Chika   : I see.
Yuta   : The foods were really delicious, and I felt I could have a
                 different experience by going with my classmates (rather than Japanese
                 friends), no doubt about it. Because we talked in English all day along.
                 With Japanese friends, we can't help using Japanese.
(Yuta Interview, 8th October, 2014)

Furthermore, he went to a local pub alone and talked to anybody who sat near him. In his diary, he reflected on this: "I will not drink so much with only Japanese friends" (Diary extract, 20th August), "It was good to play tennis with foreigners this evening, but I should be careful not to gather with Japanese" (Diary extract, 27th August).

He also showed me a photograph of himself drinking at a pub with local people. It seems that he was encouraged by his success in communicating with people; not only with

'native' speakers, but also with other 'non-native' speakers. He introduced Japanese culture as a topic of a conversation with people he met in a pub. Yuta reflected more on his interactions with his new acquaintances and tried harder to communicate with them.

Although both interviewees needed to stay in a dormitory with Japanese students, their experiences were varied. Yuta, especially, tried to communicate with various English speakers who were not only 'native' speakers, but also 'non-native' speakers for him. On the other hand, Kaito limited the opportunities to communicate with various English speakers. In addition, he had a critical view of Asian international students' English grammar. It implies that he saw various Englishes or the varieties of English skills negatively, by standing his ground.

After the Sojourn

After coming back to Japan, Yuta started to prepare for his long-term overseas study programme in Sweden. In addition, he continued to support international students. Kaito started to participate in other activities which were not related to study abroad. He started to revise for examinations in preparation for his career as an officer in Japan.

Discussion

From these findings, there are main three discussions in relation to the three research questions in this study.

The first aim of this study is to examine how Japanese students construct images of English speakers. In particular, this study tries to explore who Japanese SA students expect to be desired English models. In the case of Kaito, his desired English model is strongly linked to the concept of the so-called 'native' speaker. As Takahashi argues that the discourse of "*ryugaku* functions to legitimate the ownership of English by the inner circle by ignoring the status of other countries" (2013, p. 44), it can be said that Kaito expected to acquire the English of the inner circle through the discourse of '*ryugaku*'. Furthermore, in the pre-sojourn period, Kaito tended to have ethnocentric viewpoints as he regarded Japan as superior in comparison with Asia. Although he had already had many experiences of going abroad before taking part in the study abroad programme this study focused on, he had had no close relationship with others who did not have Japanese roots. On the other hand, it can be said that the interlocutors to whom Yuta wanted to talk in English were not restricted to the so-called 'native' speakers. Prior to his sojourn, he had already made friends with people who did not have Japanese roots.

According to their narratives, this study implies that the one of the reasons which differentiates their ideas of English speakers relies on to what extent they had had close relationships with people who did not have Japanese roots in the pre-sojourn period. It is not the frequency of encountering people who do not have Japanese roots but the close relationships with them that can be influential for the construction of images of English speakers. This indicates that deep intercultural communication, such as being close friends with international students, widens the perspective of learners in considering who English speakers can be. In other words, in-depth intercultural experience would expand learners' imaginations towards people who speak various Englishes.

The second aim of this study is to examine how the images of desired English speakers are influential for Japanese SA students to negotiate their identities. Then, the final aim is to examine the concept of 'Third Space' and its function in this interaction between Japanese SA students and various English speakers. During the sojourn, Kaito chose Japanese peer congregation throughout all his time in the UK. In the classroom, although there was a chance to communicate with other international students to talk in English, he stood by his

opinions and judged other international students by their mistakes in English grammar. It seems that this was because his images of desired English speakers remained connected to the so-called 'native' speakers. Being satisfied with his standpoint, he had a difficulty to understand the variety of English skills of English learners. Although he encountered Asian international students who were various English speakers in a new environment in the UK, he did not find or take 'Third Space' to negotiate his identity between him and the Asian international students. Consequently, he was not exposed to a heightened awareness of his own identity. Rather than taking a new position, 'Third Space', he took up a fixed, secured position among his Japanese peer.

On the other hand, it can be said that Yuta's case is that 'Third Space' successfully functioned in the process of identity negotiation with various English speakers. Since the pre-sojourn period, he had had not persisted in a static image of English model. During the sojourn, Yuta put significant amounts of energy into creating relationships with those he encountered from various cultural backgrounds. He reflected on this in his diary and tried harder to create encounters with various English speakers who did not have Japanese roots. In his diary, he provided insights into his relationship with those he encountered. By reflecting his position, he observed the relationship among interlocutors from a distance. In addition, in the classroom, he regarded his Asian classmates' way of English leaning as one of his models to follow. It can be said that, rather than persisting in a static image of English model, by accepting varieties of English skills, he attempted to open himself up to Asian international students. In a new cultural environment, rather than trying to assimilate into already determined binary groups - Japanese and the so-called 'native' English speaker, he found a new space by recognising a variety of English speakers and communicating with them. This can be 'Third Space' that "serves as a rebuttal or corrective to regulating, rigid views" (English, 2005, p. 87). Furthermore, when he talked with people he met in a pub, he used Japanese culture as a topic of conversation with them. He tried to communicate with others without marginalising one of his identities as Japanese. Referring to 'Third Space', Bhabha states that "[t]hese 'inbetween' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." (1994, 1-2). Reaching beyond the centre /periphery binary, it can be said that he negotiated his identity with his interlocutors and created multifaceted identities in the position of 'Third Space' which is 'potentially empowering position' (Jackson, 2004, p. 55).

Limitation

Firstly, this study introduced only two interviewees' data. Although the author could acquire the rich-data from the interviewees' narratives, the sample size is too small to generalise the result. However, the purpose of this study is to scrutinise the multifaceted experiences of each interviewee in depth rather than generalising their narratives.

Secondly, the interview sessions during their sojourn were lasting for around fifteen minutes for each interviewee due to their schedules. In addition, the interviews were conducted when three days passed after they arrived in the UK. It can be said that it is not the best timing to know what they experienced in the UK. Thus, it was needed to ask about their study abroad experiences after they went back to Japan. Although the interview sessions during the sojourn were shorter than other interview sessions in the pre-sojourn and post sojourn periods, I could share the same environment with the interviewees. For instance, I looked around the city they stayed and the dormitory they accommodated. This shared experience can be connected to help in establishing rapport between us.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to generalise the result with this small data size, it can be said that the interviewees' intercultural experiences in the pre-sojourn period were connected to the way in which they constructed images of English speakers. In addition, this study implies that the images of English speakers are considerably affective to their ways of communicating with various English speakers during their sojourn and to the ways of taking the positon of 'Third Space'. In this study, according to the interviewee who took a position of 'Third Space' to communicate with various English speakers, one can say, 'Third Space' is a productive position wherein people are allowed to create a multifaceted identity. It implies that the position of 'Third Space' would provide people multiple ways of thinking rather than simply one perspective and thereby contribute to avoiding potential conflicts with those they encountered in different cultural environments. Keenan and Miehls insist that, "Third space, therefore, is a concept that describes an openness and exploration of perspectives which can result in the emergence of new points of view" (2008, p.167). Taking a position in the middle, it can be said learners can negotiate their identities in the process of language learning without constraining the static view towards their identity, even though it is a short-term study abroad programme.

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