

Japanese language learners' experiences abroad: social networks, interaction and language usage

Rikki Campbell
Monash University

Introduction

Many researchers (e.g. Freed 1990; Segalowitz & Freed 2004; Magnan & Back 2007) have argued that students who actively pursue opportunities for L2 use by engaging with native speakers are the ones who ultimately make the most progress in SLA. With this goal in mind, study abroad programs are frequently recommended for language learners, as there is a common assumption that participation automatically guarantees increased contact with the host country's language (Freed 1995:5). However, with the recent proliferation of study abroad research, a number of studies have indicated student disappointment in not being able to meet and interact with native speakers as much as they had hoped or expected, despite being in the target language country (Allen & Herron 2003; Mendelson 2004; Magnan & Back 2007; Tanaka 2007; Hernandez 2010; Xu 2010).

It is therefore important to gain a better understanding of various study abroad contexts, and the factors that both positively and negatively influence language learners' interaction with target language speakers whilst abroad. A possible means of examining the complexities behind study abroad students' interaction and social relationships is through analysis of their social networks, which Milroy (1987:178) defines as 'the informal social relationships contracted by an individual'. This has become the goal of the current paper, which is part of a larger doctoral project examining Japanese language learner' pre-, during-, and post- study abroad interaction within their social networks.

The research presented in this paper draws upon the qualitative analysis of six Japanese learners' ethnographic interviews and interaction journals, and aims to address the following three research questions:

- 1) What are the structural characteristics of Japanese language learners' networks with native and non-native Japanese during study abroad?
- 2) What factors promote/inhibit interaction and network development with speakers of Japanese during study abroad?
- 3) What are the patterns of L1/L2 usage within these networks and what factors influence them?

Findings

Characteristics of social networks and influential factors in network formation

In order to examine the informants' social networks, this research has drawn upon Coleman's (2010) concentric circle model of student engagement. He states that whilst studying abroad, language learners' belong to three simultaneous networks: with compatriots or people sharing the same L1 (inner circle), with people from other countries (middle circle), and with local people and native speakers of the L2 (outer circle). Interestingly, it was found that for four of the informants, local hosts were the most dominant circle; whilst for the other two informants other internationals were the most dominant. By combining the number of conationals and other internationals together, however, it was found that only one informant had more local hosts than non-Japanese in their network.

Drawing upon Takai's (1990) 'contact hypothesis of adjustment' and other study abroad literature, a number of different factors influencing the informants' networks were identified. These were grouped under the categories of 'physical and situational resources' and 'personal factors', and are listed in Table 1 below.

<i>Physical and situational resources</i>	<i>Personal factors</i>
Residence type	Motivation for contact with Japanese
Class type	Japanese interest in foreigners
Buddy/tutor systems	Personal similarity/difference
Extracurricular activities	Cultural similarity/difference
Homestay programs	Prior experience
Duration of program	Learner investment in Japanese language
	Language competence

Table 1 Factors influencing informants' network development

In particular, it was found that the three informants who had the most Japanese contacts all endeavoured to make Japanese friends through joining university clubs or circles. This influenced not only their degree of Japanese interaction, but also their understanding of Japanese society, culture, and mentality. Program factors such as residence (international exclusive vs. integrated), classes (international exclusive vs. integrated; taught in Japanese or in English), and buddy programs (pairing up international and local students) offered varying opportunities for network development with native and/or non-native Japanese speakers within the educational institutes. Participation in home visit programs, where the informants came acquainted with local families, were also found to provide an important insight to Japanese family life, and offered an opportunity to expand their Japanese networks outside of the institutional setting.

Whereas the majority of informants' study abroad programs were at Japanese universities for one or two semesters, one informant, Sophie, participated in a program at a Japanese Language Institute, which only lasted six weeks. The nature of her program meant that she was constantly lumped together with other international students, and she found it difficult to find opportunities for network development with locals. Although she mentioned developing eight Japanese contacts through participation in a university tour and a home-visit program, she only met them in person once or twice, and maintained contact via Facebook or email. Sophie commented that if The Institute was able to organise regular contact with the same group of people, it would have been easier to develop more host contacts.

In addition to physical and situational resources, the informants indicated a number of different personal factors that influenced their interaction and network development with Japanese speakers whilst in Japan. Although the organisation of the various study abroad programs meant it was easy to develop

friendships with other foreigners, friendship development with local hosts proved more challenging. Each of the informants displayed varying degrees of motivation for contact with Japanese people, and recognised that making friends with Japanese people would not necessarily be easy.

Equally important to the informants' motivation for contact with local Japanese, however, was Japanese interest in foreigners. Many of the friendships developed were with Japanese who had themselves been abroad, or intended to in the future. For contacts to develop into friendships, all of the informants mentioned that personal similarity in terms of personality and shared interests was a crucial factor. Some of them also spoke of cultural similarity or difference playing a role, not so much with local Japanese, but within the foreigner group, where cultural segregation was often present. One of the informants, Sophie, claimed that cultural differences were 'one of the hardest things with this program', influencing the types of social activities people participated in, and preventing a lot of social interaction. On the other hand, she found that 'being able to have your own group and fit in with like-minded people, you know that whatever activity you do, it'll be something that you're comfortable with'. Finally, three of the informants also mentioned that although they knew the importance of using Japanese to improve their second language, being able to fully express themselves was also important for developing closer friendships. This leads into the next section, which introduces patterns of language use and factors influencing them.

Patterns of language use and influential factors

In order to identify the informants' language use patterns within their Japanese speaking networks, Nishimura's (1992) categories of bilingual speech were employed. She uses three categories, namely 'the basically Japanese variety', 'the basically English variety', and 'the mixed variety', which refers to simultaneous use of both languages. Furthermore, an additional category of 'other language' was also necessary. After establishing patterns of language use, Grosjean's (1982) factors in language choice in bilingual settings were drawn

upon to examine the factors influencing these patterns. The four main categories identified by Grosjean are participants, situation, content of discourse, and function of interaction, which has been used to classify the factors identified in the current study, which are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Factors influencing patterns of language choice

<p><i>Participant-related factors</i> Network participants' knowledge of English (or French) Perceived L2 proficiency of other learners</p>	<p><i>Situation-related factors</i> Location/setting Presence of monolingual Japanese Fatigue or lack of time Channel of interaction</p>
<p>Investment in Japanese by learners Investment in relationships with network participants Ethnic appearance</p>	<p><i>Content of discourse-related factors</i> Topics Common L2 words</p>
	<p><i>Function of interaction-related factors</i> To include someone To clarify L2 vocabulary</p>

Although each of the informants claimed to primarily use the 'basically Japanese variety' when interacting with a Japanese person, patterns of language selection between Japanese learners were much more complex, and were composed of all four language varieties. Regardless of whether the network member was a native or non-native speaker of Japanese, however, the key factor that influenced patterns of language selection was the degree of their network members' knowledge of English, or French in the case of one informant whose native language was French. When available, a common coping strategy for the informants was to code-switch to English when they were unsure of a Japanese word.

Language use with other non-native Japanese speakers not only differed from informant to informant, but also between each informant and their individual network members. The general consensus, however, was that the informants would use English with other English speakers, and Japanese with others from

non-English backgrounds. All but one informant, Jane, tended to feel 'awkward' or 'weird' if talking to native English speakers in Japanese, unless it was group interaction where people with little to no English knowledge were present. Jane, on the other hand, claimed to frequently use Japanese with several other native English speakers, influenced by the fact that she had monolingual Japanese residing in her dormitory. This meant that Japanese was the common language in frequent group socialisation, which potentially reinforced the use of Japanese in individual interaction as well. Thus, she mentioned only using English with those who had a lower Japanese ability than herself, in order to enable faster and more in-depth conversation. This sentiment was also expressed by two other informants, who chose English over Japanese in order to better express themselves and have more in-depth conversations that they couldn't yet achieve in Japanese.

One of the informants, Alex, held some knowledge of both Chinese and Korean, and used these languages with students from the respective countries. He claimed that with his Chinese friends they communicated entirely in Chinese for the first three months, however, that 'as they got more proficient in Japanese, and my Chinese got worse, we would use Japanese more'. Alex appeared to exhibit great investment in his second language usage, stating that 'I don't really like to use English towards people who speak a language that I can use myself, because I can use that'. Moreover, Alex expressed his firm beliefs about being proactive in using Japanese, and how he tried to avoid English speakers in order to force himself to use Japanese. Phoebe also exhibited investment in her Japanese usage, claiming that even though one of her study abroad peers had fluent L2 knowledge of English, she preferred to use Japanese with her, as they were in Japan to study the language.

Three of the informants, Phoebe, Sophie and Marie, also mentioned discourse-content related factors that influenced their language choice. Phoebe claimed to use Japanese with other native English speakers when 'joking around or to say something funny, or... [if] it tends to be based around study, or just very

leisurely things'. Sophie, on the other hand, mentioned that she would sometimes use Japanese when 'speaking about characteristic Japanese things: Japanese culture, Japanese music, those sorts of things'. Interestingly, Marie mentioned switching to French when talking about topics such as French wine with her British friends who had some knowledge of French. Sophie also mentioned an additional discourse-content related factor impacting language selection, where she and her English-speaking friends would stick to predominantly English, but insert the more frequently used Japanese words such as 'shashin' (photo) and 'eki' (station).

Conclusion

Based upon the analysis of six Japanese language learners' experiences, the findings presented here have shown how a multitude of factors influence learners' interaction, network development, and patterns of language use whilst abroad. By taking a qualitative approach to this research, it is hoped that the learners' voices will be heard, offering firsthand insight into the complexity behind their patterns of behavior. It must be noted, however, that reliance on informants' self-report data, and associated issues of memory retention and romanticized versions of events, are all acknowledged limitations of this research.

Reference List

- Coleman, J. (2010). *Key-note speech: What is the year abroad for? Insights and principles to inform assessment*. Assessment of the Year Abroad in Modern Language Degrees. University of Bath. Retrieved 9th September 2012 from <http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/Panopto/Pages/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=b0429c58-a331-494e-bde0-eedccbb1182f>
- Freed, B. F. (1990). Language learning in a study abroad context: The effects of interactive and non-interactive out-of-class contact on grammatical achievement and oral proficiency. In I. J. Atlati (Ed.), *Linguistics, language teaching and language acquisition: The interdependence of theory, practice and research* (pp. 459–477). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. .
- Freed, B. (Ed.). (1995). *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

- Grosjean, F. (1982). *Life with two languages: an introduction to bilingualism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hernandez, T. (2010). The Relationship Among Motivation, Interaction, and the Development of Second Language Oral Proficiency in a Study-Abroad Context. *The Modern Language Journal, online in advance of print*, 1-17.
- Isabelli-García, C. (2006). Study Abroad: Social Networks, Motivation and Attitudes: Implications for Second Language Acquisition. In M. DuFon & E. Churchill (Eds.), *Language Learners in Study Abroad Contexts* (pp. 231-258). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Magnan, S., & Back, M. (2007). Social interaction and linguistic gain during study abroad *Foreign Language Annals, 40*(1), 43-61.
- Milroy, L. (1987). *Language and social networks*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Nishimura, M. (1992). Language choice and in-group identity among Canadian Niseis. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication (Multilingual Matters), 3*(1), 97-113.
- Segalowitz, N., & Freed, B. (2004). Context, Contact and Cognition in Oral Fluency Acquisition: Learning Spanish in At Home and Study Abroad Contexts. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 26*, 173-199.
- Takai, J. (1990). Host contact and cross-cultural adjustment of international students in Japan: Assessment instruments and some descriptive statistics 大学論集 (*Research in higher education*) (Vol. 20, pp. 195-228). Hiroshima: Hiroshima University.
- Tanaka, K. (2007). Japanese students' contact with English outside the classroom during study abroad. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics, 13*(1), 36-54.
- Xu, G. (2010). Understanding the Role of Interaction From Linguistic, Affective, and Social Perspectives. *TESL Canada Journal, 27*(2), 68-88.