Cultural Identity Shifts After Study Abroad

Kaori Ono

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Abstract

Young people's affiliations with groups change over time (Hopkins, 2010) and as they accumulate life experiences their identities change too (Northhoff, 2014). Living for prolonged periods abroad can have a huge impact on our students who may have left shy and introverted then return more confident and outgoing. The whole experience of living abroad and interacting with a foreign culture evidently has a significant influence on their identity. The topic of 'identity' is something that according to Ogawa (2017) has seen an "explosion of interest", yet still remains difficult to define. Crisp, in Ogawa (2016) also claims that "diversity is arguably the most persistently debated characteristic of modern societies" (p. 70, 2016). Although the number of students studying abroad is increasing exponentially, little is still known about how or why many students return to their homelands illustrating many positive attributes and a notable change in character after lengthy periods of studying abroad. What exactly is the cause of this impact and change in identity after approximately one-year sojourns abroad? This study attempts to answer this question and discover what exactly the cause of such changes is and reveal how students see themselves and their view of the world around them on their return.

To investigate this point, ten students who had studied abroad from periods ranging from 3-months to one year were asked a series of 15 questions in an

interview situation.　Questions in the interview asked subjects to comment on how they viewed themselves before and after their study abroad experience.　Interviews were recorded and transcribed.　Researchers then used transcripts as the main source of results and answer research questions.

Qualitative data analysis was adopted to classify responses into a sequence of categories.　Such categories included *Challenges, Confusion Caused by Language Barriers & Cultural Differences, Improved Language Skills, Connecting with others, Acceptance of Diversity, Discovery of a New Self, New Perspectives on Diversity, Desire to Become Influential in Changing Society, Global Identity Established, and a "New Version of Self"*.　After the interview data was transcribed, Milton J Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, DMIS（2009, 2013）was employed to categorize student data to interpret the Japanese university students' identity formation processes.　The results of the analysis suggest that many of the Japanese students interviewed in this study established their global identities by adjusting themselves to the host culture.　One student tried to maintain her global identity by othering herself from the mainstream Japanese students after her return to Japan.　This research reports on student's individual identity formation process and discusses the roles educators can play in supporting students who have had intercultural conflicts and return with more progressive global identities.
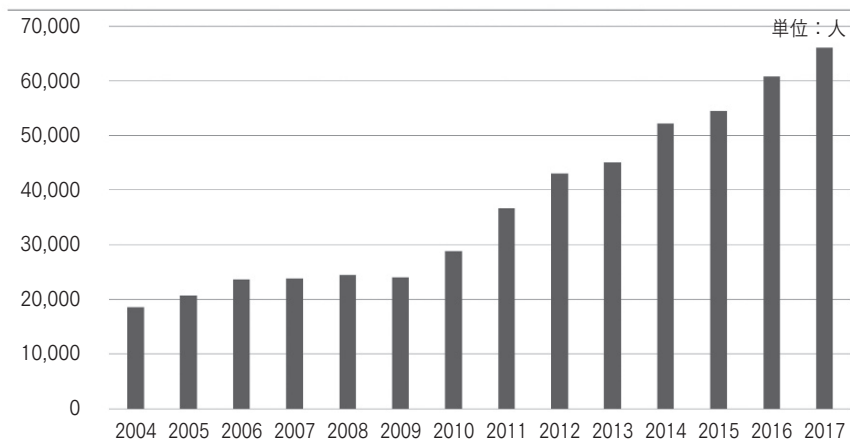
1．Introduction

In the complex globalized world of today, it is crucial for university students to develop the necessary skill sets to overcome cultural barriers and to work collaboratively with others who may have different cultural backgrounds.　In general though, the education system in Japan focuses on students studying within their own culture（Ogawa, 2016, 2017 ; Shaules, 2015）and is not specifically aimed at preparing for exchange programs to study in a foreign country or interact

with people from different cultural backgrounds.　In response to this perception, as can be seen in Figure 1, the numbers of students who choose to study abroad has been increasing from 2004 to 2017 nearly a double increase in numbers.

　　The Tobitate, leap for tomorrow study abroad campaign[1] initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology ［MEXT］ has been attempting to promote intercultural learning programs for Japanese exchange students to enhance intercultural learning through studying abroad experiences.　These efforts have resulted in positive outcomes concerning the growth of student interest in different cultures（Hopkins, 2010 ; Kim, 2001, 2005 ; Toomey, 2019）as well as acquiring intercultural communication skills and nurturing global identities（Hopkins, 2010 ; Kim, 2001, 2005 ; Sueda, 2014 ; Sueshige, 2016 ; Toomey, 2019）.　While Japanese students have often been reported to face difficulties in communicating well in global settings（Barnlund, 1989 ; Hall, 1959, 1976 ; Ikeya, 2016, Sueda, 2014 ; Sueshige, 2016）and establishing their global identities, there is a lack of research describing the changes on students who have successfully managed to build a global identity.　Many researchers agree that it is crucial for university students who are in the midst of internalization in Japan to have an understanding of a global identity （Kim, 2001, 2005 ; Norton, 2014 ; Sueda, 2012 ; Shaules, 2015 ; Toomey, 2019） as Ogawa（2017）writes :

　　　With the aging of Japanese society, it is the younger generation who may hold
　　　the key to Japan's future and it is their identifications and values that are likely
　　　to determine many aspects of life once their influence takes a stronghold in
　　　society.（p. 88）

　1）Tobitate !（Leap for Tomorrow）　Study Abroad Initiative is led by Japan's Ministry of
　　Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology（MEXT）that aims to help young Japanese
　　take the first step towards studying abroad.

Figure 1.　Transition of Japanese students studying abroad

Source : Education Career

The research subject of identity formation among young Japanese is an important as well as a timely topic.　Therefore, this research focuses on the analysis of the identity formation of young participants' study abroad experiences.

2.　Literature review

2.1　Theories on the Adjustment of Individuals in Intercultural Contexts

　　Regarding the theoretical framework of this study, Milton J Bennett's（2009, 2013）Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity was employed to categorize student data.　Bennett's model comprises of six stages to show how people living abroad change over time to become more aware of other cultures and more culturally competent.　The six stages are as follows.　*Denial, Defense* and *Minimization* are the Ethnocentric stages.　Individuals at the *denial* stage tend to think theirs is the only culture.　They are not interested in other cultures and don't clearly understand the differences between their culture and other cultures.　In this stage, individuals

know there are differences between cultures but think that their culture is the best. Individuals in the *Minimization* stage tend to simplify culture differences. Thinking "Everyone is the same, they are just like me" and accept the superficial cultural differences which can lead to misunderstandings and communication problems. After the three Ethnocentric stages, Bennet describes a further three Ethnorelative stages, *Acceptance* is the first step for intercultural integration. This refers to the belief that "your culture and my culture are different and that is OK" stage. An individual who would be categorized in this cohort is often interested in other cultures. They may mostly accept and tolerate the wider cultural differences, but they are not able to face cultural conflict. At the *Adaptation* stage, individuals are culturally competent, may be capable of adapting their behavior, thinking and seeing things from a different perspective and may become effective intercultural communicators. Finally, *Integration* refers to individuals that see themselves as interculturalists, it is not hard for such individuals to accept and adapt their behavior to cultural differences and become bi-cultural. Bennett argues that the pursuit of *Integration* is the ideal stage that individual seek in order to build a true global identity. However, it should be realized that this framework can be affected by certain situations and therefore each level needs to be carefully unfolded. Please refer to figure 2 as the following.
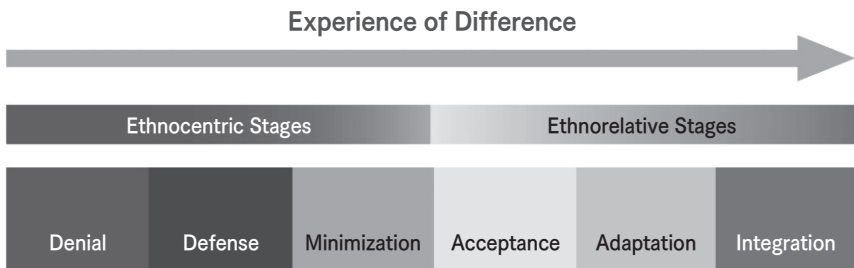

Figure 2. **Milton J Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity（DMIS）**

2.2　Personal Identities

This section of the paper examines the identities of young Japanese. When we touch upon identity, most of us may think about our personal identity, or how we define ourselves. However, each individual's personal identity is shaped by how we see ourselves with regards to others. If we see ourselves as somebody's spouse or mother or teacher, that relationship will be part of our personal identity. As Ting-Toomey（2019）mentions "personal identity is developed in conjunction with the evolution and reinforcement of sociocultural and socio-relational role membership". Furthermore, our relational identity with others can influence our behavior as well. For example, as a teacher, we might dress, act, and speak in a particular manner.

The way others perceive or behave towards us can also influence our identity. For instance, if society sees our gender or ethnicity as superior or inferior, that will also influence our personal, relational identities. It is a sense of self and how a person perceives his or her own interactions, thoughts, emotions, and growth. Dolby（2004）claims that personal identity while/during a study abroad involves "encountering oneself in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self".

2.3　National Identities

The way we identify ourselves with our home culture is also referred to a lot in the literature as national identity. National identity is defined as a person's affiliation with a set of inherited values and beliefs that form one's sense of their own culture（Dolby, 2004）. Many scholars（Dolby 2004 ; Kim, 2001, 2005 ; Shuales, 2015）state that studying abroad influences students' national identity. For example, some scholars（Sueda, 2012 ; Podalsky, 2004）claim any Japanese person who becomes overly familiar with foreign cultures, either living abroad or having a

lengthy contact with foreigners is thought to be considered as having lost their purity as a Japanese.　Sueda（2012）found that *kikokushijyos* experienced difficulty readjusting to Japan after returning from abroad with weaker national identifications. However, this is not necessarily the case with all individuals.　For instance, Kashima and Loh（2006）claim that some Asian students who were studying in Australia were reported to have more international ties with the host culture, as well as strengthening their identification with the original culture.

2.4　Global Identities

Global identity on the other hand is defined as the way students see themselves in relation to the world and as a citizen of humanity rather than a citizen of a nation （Braskamp & Engberg, 2013）.　These identity changes can be more pronounced when living in a foreign country（Kim, 2005, 2007, Kudo, K., & Simkin, K. A., 2003, Toomey, 2019）.　Further, many scholars（Kim, 2005, 2007, Sueda 2012, Shaules, 2015, Toomey, 2019）noted study abroad experience provides the opportunity of encountering the world, becoming aware of their old ways of thinking, and nurturing one's insights.

2.5　Purpose of This Study

This paper aims to examine how students' study abroad experiences influence self-identity shifts over time in conjunction with a separate research project on Japanese university students who had studied abroad.　The purpose of this study is to understand the identity formation process and various influences of several Japanese exchange students who have studied abroad for extended periods and have managed to establish their identities as global citizens despite the language barrier and cultural differences they encountered.　While Japanese students have often been reported to face difficulties in communicating well（Kashima & Loh, 2006, Kudo,

K., & Simkin, K. A., 2003, Sueda, 2012, Toomey, 2005, 2007）and establishing
their global identities, there is a lack of research describing their transitions on how
those who have successfully managed to build a global identity.　This study seeks
to fill this gap.

　　Qualitative research was employed to explore the Japanese students' identity
formation process in terms of identity and acculturation, examining the impact of
interaction with their classmates and host families.　The two research questions
considered are as follows :

　1.　How do study abroad experiences of Japanese students influence shifts in
　　　self-identity ?
　2.　How can language ability influence shifts in identity ?

Understanding Japanese students' identity formation processes is important for
capturing their well-being and providing insight into the practical implications of
intercultural relationships.

3．Methodology

3.1　Participants

　　With the help of local international centers at two universities the joint
researcher and the author contacted ten students with experience studying abroad
at Matsuyama University and Ehime University for this study.　All 10 students
were Japanese nationals and university students in Ehime prefecture.　They ranged
in age from 19 to 25 years old and had lengths of two to 18 months studying abroad
in seven countries.

3.2 Data collection

The data collection procedure for this research is as follows. Upon being invited for interview all students were sent a list of questions and an interview date was set.   The interview data for this research were derived from a larger exchange student interview project that the joint researcher and the author conducted during February 2020 to March 2020.   It proved more difficult than expected to recruit the students.   The first process was to get students to sign a consent form before the interview.   Eligible students were recruited from classes and through contacts at the university international centers.   After receiving consent to cooperate with this study all ten students were invited for interviews.

Once email addresses were obtained, students were invited for an interview. All of the interviews were recorded with permission from the students using an IC recorder.   These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format at the joint researcher's office or at a local coffee shop, depending on the convenience of each interviewee.   Participants were compensated with a 2,000 yen Amazon gift card for each interview.   This study employed a semi-structured interview style which enabled students to provide narrative data as it ensured their freedom to express feelings or views on their own terms.   Also, to ensure that students were well prepared for their interview we sent the interview questions one week prior to the arranged date of interview.   The length of interviews ranged from 45-65 minutes. Students were not required to specifically speak in one language, rather they could choose whichever they felt more comfortable with and switch any time they felt necessary.

There were 15 survey questions in total, however, only the questions related to identity are discussed in this paper :

a. Do you think your identity changed while you were there ?

b．How about after you returned？

c．Do you feel you have absorbed some of your host culture's values and behaviors？　If so，what are they？

d．Have you experienced some kind of identity conflict since you returned？

e．Are you sometimes confused about how to behave in a certain situation due to cultural differences？

f．Which was more challenging for you, adjusting to the host country or adjusting to Japan when you came back？

g．While you were abroad and after your return, were there people around you with similar experiences with whom you could talk about your identity, or about your memories living abroad.

h．While you were living abroad, were their certain events that you found stressful？　Perhaps you learnt more about the host culture through these events？

i．How about after you returned？　Did you experience any situation where you felt uncomfortable or stressful after returning？

3.3　Data Analysis

Many scholars（Kinoshita, 2003, Toomey, 2019）claim the advantages of utilizing the Grounded Theory Approach. According to Toomey（2019）the merits of using Grounded Theory Approach method are "it illuminates emergent communication data from the insiders' viewpoint with no preconceived, superimposed concepts；it captures insiders' relevant stories and everyday speech activities：and it connects relevant situational dynamics with insiders' system of meaning interpretations." Therefore, this study utilized this approach in order to focus on participants' various local realities and the identity formation processes.

To ensure the credibility and dependability required in a qualitative research,

the procedures for data collection were recorded in detail (Flick, 2014). Once interview data was transcribed, the researcher used an open coding strategy to code the data, selecting codes relevant to the research questions. The researcher compared each participant's codes and grouped similar codes. As the research continued, some categories were integrated into a large category group.

Table 1. Participant Information

Number	Student	Gender	DMIS Score	Length	Where	English/Japanese usage during interview
1	H	Female	5	1 year	U. K. Bristol	100/0
2	K	Female	5	18 months	US, Oregon/Ireland/Dublin	90/10
3	T	Female	5.5	1 year	U. S. Louisiana	100/0
4	M	Female	5	1 year	U. S. California	100/0
5	J	Male	4	1 year	Australia/Philippines	10/90
6	S	Male	4.5	1 year	Australia	70/30
7	I	Male	5	10 months	U. K. Canterbury	100/0
8	T	Female	4	7 months	Australia Brisbane	100/0
9	Y	Male	3.5	3 months	Canada, Victoria	10/90
10	A	Female	4	2 months	Ireland/Dublin	30/70

Table 2. Category List : Students' Adaptation Process

Categories	Subcategories	Description
Challenges (9)	*Confusion Caused by Language Barrier & Cultural Differences*	*Various sorts of difficulties students experience*
Connecting With Others (5)	*Improve Language Skills* *Accepting Diversity*	*Various active acts to blend into the locals*
Discovery of a New Self	*New Perspectives on Diversity* *Desire to Become Influential in Changing Society*	*Students come back with different values & perception.*
Global Identity Established (2)	*"New Version of Me"*	*Students developed their identity as a global person*

Note : ( ) indicates the number of the participants who mentioned codes related to this category.

4．Findings

　　Categories related to Japanese students' adjustments are shown in Table 3 and participate information in table 2. The students experienced many kinds of challenges and illustrated made different ways to combat their frustrations. Gradually, each student showed differing ways of adapting to their host countries. One participant scored 5.5 of the DMIS score which indicates the ideal stage for people who may become a bridge between people among different cultures in the future. This section will describe each category one by one. At the end of the section, the model used to account for the global identity formation process will be explained in more detail.

4．1　Challenges

　　Many of the students interviewed reported that they liked the laid-back lifestyle of the locals who value their family and friends in a more free atmosphere compared to Japan. Nevertheless, approximately 80% stated that they had also experienced language barriers and cultural challenges while studying abroad. This category shows participants' challenges, regarding their language competency or communicative approach. These sentiments are exemplified in the following quote in 4.1.1

4．1．1　Confusion Caused by Language Barrier & Cultural Differences

　　This category introduces students' conflicts caused by language barriers and cultural differences while studying abroad. One female participant commented as follows.

　　"I had fun in general, but there were moments when I felt really uncomfortable because I was in a small town in the South, so people often talked about their

beliefs and religions.

I'm not that religious and I never had moments to think about my religion at all, I mean being Japanese, I participated in some rituals with my family in a Buddhist way or of course I go to shrine on New Year's Day, but it was uncomfortable because I didn't know what to say, people want to know me in that perspective, but I didn't have anything to explain to them in detail from a religious perspective." （3T ）

Some students experienced frustrations due to different communication styles and tried to talk in a more straightforward manner when communicating with their classmates. They gradually learned the importance to express themselves when talking to their peers.   One student mentioned as follows.

"Japanese people, understand the mind from their attitudes or atmosphere, but people abroad don't seem to. If I don't say "no" clearly, they won't understand me. It was really hard for me because I thought I might hurt them."（1H）

"They indicate their feelings "yes or no", clearly, they are very decisive. But I think Japanese people don't do that. The foreign students I met there and the Australian people. We don't say "yes or no" clearly, but sometimes it irritated them（other foreign students）. I felt that we have to say yes or no more clearly after hearing that."（6S）

When the participant was asked if the "socializing culture" in UK is different from Japanese one, he replied,

"They are very friendly and try to make our conversation funny and interesting. I became curious in knowing them（knowing about them more）their life, what they're doing."（7I）

Even students who were more fluent in English commented that they had a hard time understanding subtle nuances such as slang spoken by their fellow local college students.　One female student mentioned :

"I think I felt differently when I was in the States.　I felt that I was a foreigner as I said.　I felt really inferior because other international students who were much much better than me at English.　I studied hard because as I felt I always had to catch up with them because of my lack of English skills.　This was especially true in my first semester like I really didn't know what was going on around me, there was so much slang which was very hard to understand and I just didn't know what they were talking about."（3M）

In the early stages of studying abroad, nearly 70％ of students experienced homesickness and sometimes they felt isolated from their host family and missed their family and friends in Japan.　One participant commented.

"In the beginning, I could not blend in well with my host family during dinner."（2K）

"I had to eat dinner alone and sometimes called my friend back home because I was homesick."（I0A）

4.2 Connecting with others

Some Japanese students enjoyed communicating with their classmates and locals through their new way of communicating and discovering new things they had in common. This point is illustrated by the comment :

"I think my communication style with my foreign friends is different from the Japanese communication way. I feel they are closer to me. Like holding hands, hugging, things like that." （1H）

4.2.1 Improve Language Skills.

Most students felt that it was crucial for them to accomplish a level of proficiency in English so that they could integrate well into class and with their host family. Many who showed a certain degree of effort in immersing themselves into the host culture, for example, by joining club activities after school and participating in volunteer work. Whereas, others tried to keep a certain distance from other Japanese exchange students to blend with the locals. For example, let us look at the following comment. One female student mentioned :

"There was one Japanese girl, but we were friends even before we went to the states so were kind of close, but we decided not to be always together because otherwise we kind of would use Japanese all the time. We were passionate about improving our English ability at that time so like we kind of had a different group of people to hang out with so, we talked and saw each other in class everyday but I'd say we were still close, although we were not always together." ….. "I still hang out with my friend to a party and with other people, but I also studied a lot. I joined a dance class offered by the university. It wasn't very serious at all I just went there with my friends. I

also did some volunteering activities.　Visiting animal shelters and taking care of dogs."（3M）

This student studied English rigorously to communicate with her classmates and to blend in more with her peers and roommate.　On arrival in the United States, she decided to make many American friends and intentionally kept a certain distance from other Japanese speakers.　Building good relationship and blending in with her American peers seems very important and accelerated her global identity, which was also displayed in her colloquialism usage during her interview.

4. 2. 2　Accepting Diversity

Many Japanese students naturally accepted and respected the cultural customs of their host country.　Some Japanese students were accustomed to the rules and traditions of their host families.　For example, some students went to church with their host families on Sunday mornings.

"it is common in Japan to take a bath every night, but I got used to taking a bath in the morning when I was in ……."（8T）

Other students commented as the following.

"Drinking tea became a custom for me"（I0A）and when this student returned to Japan, she described that she continued to drink tea.

4. 3　Discovery of a New Self

Many of the Japanese exchange students showed a very positive reaction when describing their study abroad experiences.　The following two comments indicate

this :

"It changed my social life, I have totally different types of people around me right now, before I went to study abroad…." (3M)

"Nobody knew me there, so I was able to be myself."
"Staying in Australia was the best experience in my life, ever !" (5J)

While in the Philippines one student claimed that he mixed mostly with other Japanese students and in Australia he lived in a shared apartment. He feels that after coming back from Australia he became more open and proactive than he used to be. Other student recalled their transition as in the following comment :

"It's a really small thing, but for example, realizing that I like dancing. Before going to the UK, I thought that dancing in public was embarrassing. Without this experience in the UK, I wouldn't have realized that I like dancing. I also talk to my parents more now than I used to." (1H)

4.3.1 New Perspectives on Diversity

Students had less ethnocentric views and were more willing to accept other cultures, rather than to judge them based on their own morality or citizenship. Many students became more open to diversity as the following comments showed :

"I was just willing to blend in or just accept it but when I came back, to Japan, I already became a bit a different person because I speak more English and I saw many different types of people while I was abroad. I gained many different values." (3M)

4.3.2 Desire to Become Influential in Changing Society

Many of the participants gained confidence through their study abroad experience.　Some participants were willing to take the initiative in helping people with different cultural backgrounds.

"When I see foreign people, who seems to be in trouble, I became not to be afraid to talk with them after returning to Japan.　Before going to the UK, I was afraid because I may not be able to understand their English and they may not speak English well.　However, I learned that language wasn't a matter. We can communicate with each other even with imperfect English."（7I）

4.4 Global Identity Established.

Several of the participants at this stage seem to be able to code-switch their cultural identity with a sort of unconscious flexibility.　Some students who managed to adapt to their host countries and Japan with a Global identity eventually seemed to have reached the stage of *Adaptation* of Milton J Bennett's DMIS model. *Adaptation* is the first step for intercultural integration.　An individual at this stage refers to participants who show an ability to acquire cultural competence that they could adapt their behaviors, thinking and perspectives so that they become more effective intercultural communicators.　One student commented :

"Maybe, it was harder when I came back to Japan because I was really excited to study abroad and that was what I always wanted to do and finally I went to the states so I was like, of course there was some cultural differences that I have to adjust but I was just willing to blend in or just accept it but when I came back, to Japan.　I already became a bit a different person because I speak more English now and I saw many different types of people when I was

abroad.　I gained some different values so when I came back to Japan, I felt…
I don't know…sometimes I felt like I was acting as an older version of me
when I talk to my family or friends because…." （3M）

4. 5　"New Version of Me"

One student mentioned that she sometimes struggled with adverse situations
while studying abroad.　She learned to simply be herself, today, she is less
conscious of being different and is proud to be a person who she is.　Though
having a solid cultural identity is hard to accomplish especially in a society which is
less culturally diverse as Japan（Shaules, 2012, Hall, 1959, 1976, Sueda, 2012）,
retaining a sense of self improves an individual's chance of becoming a global
person.　When the author asked the question, which was harder for you, adjusting
to the US on arrival, or adjusting back to Japan on returning？　One participant
commented,

"I think adjusting to Japan was harder.　It was kind of stressful to think about
my life after going back to Japan". （1H）

The same student mentioned that the experience of living abroad had changed her
social life and recognised a change in how she was treated on returning to Japan
mentioning that her friends had noticed a change in her on her return :

"When I came back to Japan, I was really surprised that people see me as a
person who is bilingual" "they （friends） told me that I look different, and I act
differently, they （friends） told me they see some difference……　"I had more
room in my mind to think of others now, like, ah, that person didn't really talk
much yet so maybe I should ask something.　I also feel like a kind of teacher

side." （3M）

This student gained more leadership after her studying abroad experience.　Another student mentioned as follows.

"It was a great opportunity to realize my identity and personality.　For insurance, I didn't know before going to Bristol that I liked dancing, but after that, I realized how exciting dancing was.　I spontaneously dance when I heard music.　It's a really small thing, but for example, realizing that I like dancing.　Before going to the UK, I thought that dancing in public was embarrassing.　Without this experience in the UK, I wouldn't realize that I like dancing." （3M）

5. Discussion

This section begins by presenting the results of the interview data.　The author then integrated the qualitative data to answer each of the following research questions.　There are two research questions for this paper.　Ramifications for research, theory, and practices are suggested where appropriate and limitations are discussed.

Research Question 1.　How do study abroad experiences of Japanese students influence shifts in self-identity?

Research Question 2.　How can language ability influence shifts in identity?

The first research question was how do study abroad experiences of Japanese students influence shifts in self-identity?　With regards to this question, the author discovered that all students mentioned that they felt more positive and confident

about themselves after studying abroad. In addition, analysis found that most of the participants identify themselves as more international than being a Japanese. Some of the student who mentioned their shifts in identity, also indicated more independence of others on returning. Therefore, their identities might have been influenced through such experiences which could explain changes observed. During the interview, one participant described a change in body language, mannerisms and greeting styles when communicating with others on return. The same participant showed a heightened interest and enthusiasm when describing events abroad and explained that she showed reluctance at first to mix and speak for example, *"when I see other friends and talk to them（in an American way）, they seem not so happy from their gestures, and they often say to me 'this is Japan'. I don't know what I did（it's unconscious for me）and it's normal for me and don't remember what I did, but I get that often."* In general, most of the students showed positive results of change. It was discovered that through the interviews that the longer the time abroad the bigger the change.

Regarding the second research question, "How can language ability influence shifts in identity"? This research found out that the greater the ability, the greater the integration and higher the DMIS score. The average DMIS score for the female students was 4.8 on the other hand the male students indicated an average DMIS score of 4.25. Language served as a barrier for some students who were not able to communicate well with local people, but also acted as a mighty tool for those who were able to use them and interacted with local people as long-term visitors, rather than tourists. Furthermore, compared to Japan, students noticed that language plays a large part in the social context of the United States and Canada which has much more diversity than what they were used to.

Results suggested that study abroad experiences can alter national identity beliefs and cultural identity shifts. This research may be of interest to those

wishing to discover more about the complex identity issues that students have during and on returning from prolonged study abroad experiences. As only 10 students were interviewed, additional investigation needs to be conducted with a broader study before the discussion of the findings can be developed further.

6. Conclusions

This study showed that all students felt an increased global identity through their study abroad experiences and some felt an obligation to support others with different cultural backgrounds upon their return to Japan. One participant who scored the highest DMIS score gained leadership and was unconsciously willing to be an agent of positive change in society. Furthermore, most of the students had less ethnocentric views and were more willing to accept other cultures, rather than to judge them based on their own beliefs or own cultural views. This experience increased personal conviction, confidence, and independence in the students. Most of the students expressed some level of increased willingness to try and learn new things and many of the participants showed positive attitudes to explore further study abroad possibilities in the future.

Overall, these findings expressed the students' self-reported identities after their study abroad experiences. Therefore, there were several limitations to this study. The first is that this study researched approximately one-year sojourns which is a midterm study abroad period. Results and findings could have been different if this study researched by a much longer period of study abroad experiences for example several years, in which students would have more time to belong in different social groups and experience waves of homesickness and culture shock. Second is the nature of the interviews. Students responded to our questions and reported on cultural experiences and identity. While the combination of self-observation and self-reporting contributed to the detail of students' experiences, however, the data

presented in interviews is limited by what participants chose to share. In addition, since these interviews took place after their return to Japan, students also had an altered perspective of their experiences in retrospect. This may have contributed to the positive nature of most of the interviews because students could choose to share only their most memorable experiences in the interview.

As mentioned before, it is challenging for students to engage in intercultural encounters on university campuses, despite the effort on the part of Japanese universities to promote internationalization. For Japanese students who are trying to improve their English proficiency, have little opportunity to interact with students from English speaking countries while studying at a university in Japan. To foster the growth of students who can be active players on the global stage, it is essential for educators to provide opportunities to experience intercultural encounters and help them learn how to bridge cultural gaps. It is the authors hope and ultimate goal to help students, enhance their understanding of different cultures, build positive human relationships as well as learn how to interact in a multicultural society.

Acknowledgements

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