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Research Article

Analyzing a Japanese University Student's Narratives on Study-Abroad and Careers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how a Japanese university student, studying abroad in the U.S., connects her study-abroad experience with her career perspective in the interview narrative. By analyzing the narratives, the study revealed the following two key points: 1) The interviewee's study-abroad experience initially seemed unrelated to her career goal, but her experience in a different culture enhanced her pre-existing interest in social welfare and reshaped her career perspective, and 2) In her interaction with the interviewer, the interviewee constructed her identity as someone who consciously aligned her career choices with her personal values and experiences, viewing her time abroad as the key to defining her future professional path. This study suggests that studying abroad is not only an opportunity for language acquisition but also has the potential to significantly transform students' career outlooks.

本研究の目的は、米国留学中の日本人大学生1名のインタビュー・ナラティブを用い、彼女が自身の留学経験とキャリア観をどのように結びつけているかを検証することである。ナラティブ分析の結果、以下の2点が明らかになった。1)インタビューの留学経験は当初、彼女のキャリア目標とは無関係に思われたが、異文化での経験を通して彼女が元々持っていた福祉への関心が高まり、キャリア観が再構築された。2)インタビュアーとの対話の中で、インタビューは自分のキャリア選択を意識的に自分の個人的価値観や経験と一致させる人としてのアイデンティティを構築し、海外留学を将来の職業的進路を決定する鍵として捉えていた。本研究の分析結果は、大学生の海外留学が語学習得の機会であるだけでなく、学生のキャリア観を大きく変える可能性を秘めていることを示唆している。

This case study explores how a Japanese university student studying abroad reflects on her career, examining the connection between her study-abroad experience and professional aspirations. For the past few decades, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has promoted studying abroad and their campaign has increased the number of college students studying abroad to over 100,000 per year as of 2019 (MEXT, 2024). Although online programs have emerged as an alternative after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students seeking overseas programs is expected to return to around 58,000 by 2022 (MEXT, 2024). Looking at the breakdown of the numbers, we can see that the majority of them stay overseas for a relatively short period within six months without acquiring an academic degree. Perhaps, reflecting this reality, “Tobitate!” the study abroad campaign website promoted by MEXT does not emphasize that students would acquire academic expertise, but instead, lists internal changes as the benefits of studying abroad: broadening one's perspective, raising interests in the world, increasing acceptance of diversity, nurturing Japanese identity, and so on (MEXT, n.d.). Since spending time in another country is unusual, it is likely that some impact will be seen, even if only for a short period of time. This study employs positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997; 2004; 2011) to find out how her career perspective was transformed by her study-abroad experience. I expect that this will be useful in understanding the status of the connection between studying abroad and career perspectives, and in considering future study-abroad programs.

Literature and Research Questions

Many qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted on the effects of studying abroad about inner thoughts, including career perspectives of Japanese university students. Quantitative surveys on this topic (Yokota, et al., 2016; Nejima & Fujiwara, 2017; Kawai Juku, 2018; Jasso, 2019; Goto et al., 2022) indicate that college students feel that studying abroad develops skills or mentalities useful for employment. While these studies are useful in depicting the effects of studying abroad as a whole, the experience can be different for each student. As Coleman (2013) argues, we should take the difference, often seen as a nuisance by study-abroad researchers, as part of understanding program participants' complex identities and relationships that shape their study-abroad experiences. Since quantitative studies have already shown the impact of studying abroad, it is necessary to examine in detail what these effects are, adding individuality, to find a better way for students to utilize study-abroad in employment, too. Although this is a case study

involving one person at a time, I believe that this study can contribute to this.

In qualitative studies, researchers have analyzed interview data in various ways. For example, Hanami (2006) and Iino (2019) attempted to use Life Story techniques to understand the inner thoughts of those who had studied abroad. Moreover, Okamura & Nukaga (2018) concluded that the study-abroad experience has a significant impact on college students' career perspectives through individual interviews with 38 students employing the Modified Grounded Theory approach. As for the exploration of identity, which this study also focuses upon, Nakagawa (2013) pursued one student's identity from the perspective of the transformation of the image of "study abroad" and "self" after one year study-abroad and Benthuisen (2014) examined how second language identity is constructed from interviews and writings of one Japanese university student who studied abroad in the U.S. for three weeks. These qualitative studies reflect the reality of Japanese university students to some extent, but the studies only focus on the contents. Additionally, data is collected after the students return from the programs.

The originality of this study is that I focus on not only what the speaker said in the narratives, but also how she said it, so that we can discuss in-depth issues regarding identity that emerge while the speaker talks about inner thoughts. This study will explore the interviewee's identity construction, including, for example, the process by which she came to a certain idea and the interactions with the interviewer. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there are no previous studies have interviewed Japanese university students studying abroad, and it would be valuable to hear what they feel in real time.

Based on the background and literature, this study set two research questions (RQ): 1) How does the interviewee narrate her study-abroad experience from a career perspective? 2) How does the interviewee construct her identity in the interactions with the interviewer? By exploring these points, this study aims to clarify how a person who has studied abroad views her experience and how it can be utilized in organizing thoughts or making employment decisions.

Methodology

This study will analyze one student's interview narratives. The focus of the analysis is what is said as well as how it is said, which refers to the content of the talk and the interaction between the speaker and the listener during the interview. Therefore, the analysis is conducted from a multimodal perspective, and includes fillers, pauses, and gestures. The interview data were collected following Goodwin (1981) and Holstein and Gubrium (1995), who state that interviews are active interactions between speakers and listeners and are constructed collaboratively by both parties in a here-and-now situation.

Data Collection and Participants

This study was a part of a longitudinal research project that began in 2021. Since then, I have individually collected interview data from 16 college English language learners talking about English-related topics. All interviews were conducted via the online conferencing system Zoom, as the project started when social distancing was required owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding transcripts, all utterances and the related gestures are transcribed verbatim.

The data used in this study were obtained from a semi-structured interviews conducted in February 2023. The total length of the recording is approximately one and a half hours (01:31:11), and the excerpt is approximately two minutes (00:49:12 - 00:51:39). As the interview was conducted in Japanese, I translated the verbal and nonverbal actions into English. The data are excerpted from one consecutive part of the narratives, which are presented divided in three as Transcript 1 to Transcript 3.

Interviewer (A) was an English language lecturer at Interviewee (B)'s university; however, they did not meet on campus. B, a sophomore student, belongs to a humanities department other than the Faculty of Foreign Languages or International Liberal Arts. At the time of the interview, B, who had wanted to study abroad since high school, was in a six-month study-abroad program in the U.S., with about one month left to go. She joined a program offered by her university that included the local university's academic classes. During her stay, she said that she tried to seek every opportunity to use English by attending clubs or events provided by local institutes or churches after class. Looking at her upbringing, she grew up in a rural area, which she described as relatively conventional, in Western Japan, and started living alone after college in a city in the Kansai area.

This is the second time that A interviewed B, which was conducted about a year after the previous interview. Although A and B only had opportunities to talk during the interviews, the talks were conducted in a friendly atmosphere owing to B's sociable nature. However, because B knows that A is an English teacher, the student-teacher relationship can affect B's responses in the interview.

Theoretical Background

This research employs positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997; 2004; 2011) to analyze narratives. I closely observed how the interviewee positions herself in the narratives to describe or differentiate herself in aligning with a certain group or contrasting against the other. The usefulness of the positioning theory is that it allows for an analysis

of a speaker's identity (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Following the recent trend that individual identities are either acquired by oneself or constructed spontaneously through social interactions, this study posits that identity emerges through individual characteristics or social interactions, and simultaneously refers to both the individual and the group (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). I would like to examine B's identity construction, which is assumed to be influenced by her study-abroad experience. The research subjects analyzed using positioning theory cover a wide range of topics such as immigrant, intersectionality, disaster and gender (Hata, 2020; Koba, 2023; Pontillas, 2023; Alhalwachi & McEntee-Atalianis, 2024).

Bamberg (1997; 2004) divided the positioning into three levels of analysis. Level 1 focuses on the taleworld, which refers to the episodes and experiences that are told in narratives and examines how the speaker describes his/herself and others as characters in the tale. Next, Level 2 analyzes the speaker's position in their relationship with the listener in the field of interaction. In these two, the speaker's positioning(s) in the conversation is revealed. Lastly, Level 3 draws on Levels 1 and 2 to examine the position of the transportable identity retained by the speaker even after leaving the interview setting.

By exploring how the study abroad experience affects the individual through a detailed examination of the process of identity construction, this research is expected to provide suggestions for discussions on studying abroad from the perspective of employment

Data Analysis

In a series of narratives from Transcript 1 to Transcript 3, the process by which B makes up her mind about her employment is narrated (please refer to the Appendix for the transcription symbols). First, Transcript 1 illustrates B's notions of her career perspectives and study abroad. In this scene, B answers A's questions about her career prospects and future jobs. This was mentioned after the excerpt, but she confessed that she wanted to work in the public welfare field.

Transcript 1

01. B: <えっと:: 私は::(.) あの公務員に なりたかつ(.)た ので:>
well, since I wanted to be a public servant
02. A: ((頷く))
nod
03. B: >だから 公務員に なりたいと 思ったら
so, if you want to be a public servant
04. 別に そんな 英語 喋れなくても なれるから:<
you don't have to speak English so much, so
05. 留学なんて: みたいな ことを 親には 言われたんです
you don't have to study abroad, said my parents
06. けど: でも アメリカに(.)
but, but, to America
07. だから マレーシアだ(.)の プログラムだったら あんまり お金 かからなかったんです=
so, if (I took) the program to Malaysia, it didn't cost much
08. A: =うん((頷きながら))=
yes nodding
09. B: =だから: ま 公務員になりたいけど 英語も ちょっと(.)とかって 思ってた:
so, I want to be a public servant, but learn English a little, too
10. でも このプログラム めっちゃ お金かかったから:
but this program costs so much, so
11. A: う:ん((頷く))=
I see nod
12. B: =え: どうしようみたいな なんか
what: it was like what should I do
13. 英語を 使って(.) もっと 働くべき(.)<か↓なあ> みたいな ふうには
should I work using English (in the future)

14. 思ったんですけど:
(I) thought like that, but
15. A: ((2、3回頷く))
nod a few times

In line 1, B talks about her aspirations to become a public servant for the first time. She also explains that this occupation does not require high English-speaking skills. Although there are a wide variety of positions in the civil service that require English, B says that she does not need a high level of English-speaking ability as a matter of course for the type of job she wants to be in. Therefore, her parents, who were aware of this, were reluctant to allow B to study abroad. In line 9, she considers her parents' opinion that she does not need to study abroad to apply for her preferred job. Regarding this matter, B originally planned to join a less expensive program in Asia but ended up choosing one in America, which costs much more, as shown in lines 6, 7 and 10. In this situation, B reveals that she once wondered if she should pursue a career that requires speaking in English, which would be worth the high cost (line 13). B's narrative shows hesitation regarding her future work.

In Transcript 2, B demonstrates her sense of location and how she values how she felt in that location.

Transcript 2

16. B: こっちに きて:(.) 物凄く:(.) この:
after coming here, really, this
17. じゃ いざ 英語を 勉強するって なった時に 自分は 別になんか(.)
well, now when (I) study English, I wasn't particularly
18. 英語(.)を 使いたい 動機が:
(my) motivation to use English was like
19. その(.)文化とかを(.)知って実際 その人と 話したい(.)くらいの
merely I wanted to learn about the culture and talk with the people
20. <動機:>だったから:
(that was) the motivation I had, so
21. 別に英語を使ってもうバリバリ働きたい(.)みたいな(.)感情にはこっちではならなくて=
(I) didn't just come to feel like working really hard with using English here
22. B: =うん=
I see

An intriguing point in this narrative is that she positions herself in contrast to the others. At the moment, her career options are to be "a public servant" and "a worker who frequently uses English." Applying this excerpt to Positioning Level 1, which examines one's position in the taleworld, B displays herself as the person who is reluctant to choose the latter option. She develops a narrative to evaluate her original motivation for studying abroad: She says that "(my) motivation to use English was like merely I wanted to learn about the culture and talk with the people" (lines 18–19). In this part, she used a weakened form, "くらいの (merely)" (line 19), expressing that her reasons for wanting to study abroad before coming to the U.S. were not enough in terms of a career using English.

In Positioning Level 2, which examines "here-and-now" interactions, B is developing a narrative that gives the impression that she is making the right decision based on her "sense of reality. In looking at her rhetoric, the word "こっち (here)" seems to play an important role. She uses the term "こっち (here)" (lines 16 & 21) to refer to her own location. The location called "こっち (here)" would indicate the U.S. or the city where she is currently staying. Technically, this word is an indicative word that refers to something physically close, but according to Sakuma (1983), it could also pertain to the speaker's own territory, which is distinct from that of the listener. It is evident that she is showing that she feels a strong sense of being in the U.S. B emphasizes her respect for her own feelings, which she realized only because of the move. Positioning Level 3, which argues for transportable identity, is addressed later in Discussion.

In Transcript 3, B describes the two types of episodes and later, she connects them to her aspired occupation.

Transcript 3

23. B: でそれよりは:なんか(.) その も やっぱ日本 アメリカ ものすごく
rather than that, well, Japan, America is tremendously

24. 資本主義の国だから：貧富の格差とかも すごくて
capitalistic country, so the gap between rich and poor was huge
25. A: うん
yes
26. B: もう(.)街中に溢れるホームレス(.) もう物凄く 劣悪な(.) なんか(0.5)
full of homeless people in the city well extremely poor
27. と 環境みたいなのが(.)
kinda environment
28. A: うん
yes
29. B: もう目の当たりにすることの方が 多くて：
that was what I frequently saw in person
30. A: ((頷く))
nod
31. B: で それと同時に： すごく アメリカ 自由だから：
at the same time, because America is liberal
32. あの(.) クラブ活動とか参加するときに 自己紹介するときに：
well, when people introduce themselves to join a club or something
33. A: ((頷く))
nod
34. B: なんか(.) プロナウン(.) >だから< 自分は[シーハーですよとか]
like, pronoun, I mean, I am she/her, or
35. [((手の平を自分の方に動かして))]
moving a hand to herself
36. ヒーヒムです ヒズですみたいなのを
he/him or that kind of things
37. A: ((数回頷く))
nod several times
38. B: 絶対に ゆ:: (.)わなないといけなかったり とか ま そこらへんの(.) なんか
we had to present and that sort of things
39. あ：私はなんか その：社会福祉とかの方に 興味があったので：
oh, I was interested around social wellbeing
40. なんか(.) その 自分の人権を大切に 個性を豊かにみたいなところは(.)
well, points like valuing the human rights and enriching the individuality
41. すごい アメリカって すてきだな：と思って()だから
I've been thinking America is great on the points
42. その悪い面(.) 悪い面というかその
the drawback, or how to say,
43. そのホームレスが多いっていう 社会福祉的な面と：
the social wellbeing issue that there are many homeless people and
44. A: ((数回頷く))
nod several times
45. B: その(.) なんか(.) そのいろんな(.)人が 自分のアイデンティティを持って
that well, different people have their own identities

46. 自由に(.) こう生活してるっていうところが(0.5)
and live like what they want to,
47. A: ((数回頷く))
nod several times
48. B: やば [両方見たときに:]
still, when looking at both sides
49. [((手のひらを見せて 左右に広げて))]
showing hands spread in right and left
50. あ やっぱ 自分の興味は [こころ辺だな:]ていうのを <思っ(.)て>(2.0)
ah, I felt as I thought my interest is around here
51. [((手を軽く握って 顎の両側に上げて))]
raise lightly grasped hands to either side of chin
52. A: ((数回頷く))
nod several times
53. B: 私は きっと 公務員になります
I will be a public servant
54. な[ると思います
I think I will be
55. A: [@@@((数回頷きながら))
@@@ nodding several times
56. B: @@@
@@@

In Positioning Level 1, the taleworld narrated in Transcript 3, B reveals her position as one who renews her commitment to the profession she originally wanted to pursue, based on two episodes that she only discovered when she arrived in the U.S. Let me review these two episodes now. The first one (lines 23-30) is that B saw “a full of homeless people in the city” (line 26) in an “extremely poor kinda environment” (lines 26-27). The phrase “full of” indicates a high number, which must have been a shock to B, as seen from the way she tells the story. The second episode B shares (lines 31-41) was her experience of joining clubs outside the local university. She talks about presenting pronouns like she/her or they/them as a custom “when people introduce themselves to join a club or something” (line 32). She views these positive aspects of this as an attitude that values human rights. Then, she categorizes these two issues as welfare issues, her field of interest; thus, we can see that her story leads straight to her decision to become a public servant in the welfare sector. In the following part, she states, “I will be a public servant” (line 53). She speaks clearly and boldly. She picks up two eye-opening episodes from various topics and lays them out, clearly showing how they lead to the career she wants to pursue.

Next, we will look at Positioning Level 2, what B wanted to convey in the “here and now” interaction. In the first part talking about the two episodes (lines 23-41), the way she talks shows how she was shocked or influenced. When describing the “homeless” story, she uses the fillers six times, such as “なんか” (lines 23 & 26), “その” (line 23), “も”(line 23), and “もう” (lines 26 & 29), and more frequent prolonged pronunciation and pauses than the other parts. These are assumed to indicate the speakers’ difficulty in choosing words. Likewise, in the “pronoun” story, the way she narrates the story, using prolonged pronunciation and a micro pause between “ゆ (say)” and “わなないといけなかった (had to)” (line 38), reveals her hesitation in word choice. Although the behavior was not unpleasant, it can be inferred that B felt forced to say it because it was not a practice in the culture in which she grew up in. Her expressions indicate the strong impact of the scenes she saw and the struggles she faced on novel occasions. Through these, she demonstrated a sincere attitude toward matters in the different cultures.

In the following part (lines 42-56), B presents the two episodes as powerful factors to explain her decision to become a public servant to A. In her explanation, with the gesture showing hands spread in right and left (line 49), she places the “homeless” episode on one side and the “pronoun” one on the other side. And then, she said “ah, I felt as I thought my interest is around here” (line 50) raising lightly grasped hands to either side of the chin (line 51). According to McNeill (1992), we can infer how the speaker imagines the matter being represented from these representational gestures. It is assumed that she presents these two stories as important events and tries to ultimately link them to her motivation for the job she wanted to pursue

Discussion

This study observed how a Japanese university student studying abroad talks about employment in the context of her study-abroad experience, using B's interview narratives.

For RQ1) How does the interviewee narrate her study-abroad experience from a career perspective? B was influenced by what she saw and experienced in her study-abroad, and reconsidered her career path, and used it as the basis for her decision. In Transcript 2, she uses the word “こっち (here)” and emphasizes that she only found out what she (does not) want because she actually came to the U.S. This could have been the starting point for her to consider her career. Furthermore, in Transcript 3, B cites two episodes of “homeless” and “pronoun,” and states that based on these episodes, she is convinced that the scope of her interest is welfare and that she will make a career decision.

This process is interesting because she, at first, felt no connection between studying abroad and her dreamed job as Transcript 1 shows; She said “if you want to be a public servant ... you don't have to speak English so much”(lines 3-4) and “I want to be a public servant, but learn English a little, too”(line 9). Even though she had no intention of utilizing the study-abroad experience for her careers, later, her experience in a foreign country facilitated her motivation for the future job. By seeing the actual situation and interacting with the people there, she constructed narratives from her own experiences, which firmly convinced her of the right career vision.

As of the answer for RQ2) How does the interviewee construct her identity in the interaction with the interviewer? B constructed her identity in the interaction with A as a person who makes career choices true to her vested interests. In her narratives, she tried to express logic and determination by incorporating social issues in the U.S. while maintaining a basic policy of focusing on her own experiences. Mezirow (1991), in a study on development in adulthood, argues that “experience strengthens our personal meaning system by refocusing or extending our expectations about how things are supposed to be” (p. 5). As for B, she rejected the notion that she did not need to learn English to be a civil servant, and that she should obtain a job that uses English to make the high cost of studying abroad worth it. She then construed her experience in the U.S. as a step toward the future career. Her narratives seem to re-evaluate what is taken for granted and the meaning of her own experiences.

Based on B's narrative, she was exposed to a different culture that influenced the way she constructed her identity. As Oberg (1960) argues, entering a different culture may lead to frustration and anxiety. However, one also has the chance to deal with unknown things or reflect on oneself. More importantly, it influences an individual's career outlook. By focusing not only on what was said, but also on how it was said, which was not done in previous studies, this study was able to reveal aspects of how study abroad experiences lead to a career outlook that is not linear.

Conclusion

This study has explored how studying abroad can contribute to career prospects through a single case study. Studying abroad not only improves language skills but also allows one to experience a different culture, which can lead to transformation. In B's case, although her experience abroad was not what she was initially looking for, she strengthened her interest in social welfare, which led to an increased awareness of her desired career. Thus, studying abroad provides a great opportunity to develop future perspectives.

Although this study investigated only one participant's narratives, the findings remain crucial. The process of making sense of studying abroad was investigated by exploring the narratives of the individual in detail, which could not be verified only by quantitative research alone. I would like to continue conducting case studies in the future and deepen my discussion on studying abroad and career prospects

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Appendix

Transcript Symbols

(.)	less than 1.0 second of silence]	end overlapping
(1.0)	number in parentheses indicates silence	=	latching
:	prolongation or stretching the sound	<-->	talk between them is slowed
h	exhalation	>--<	talk between them is rushed
@	laugh	()	uncertain utterance
[start overlapping	(())	descriptions of gestures