

*The Effects of Long-term Study Abroad on Second Language Identity:  
The Case of Korean International Students in Australia*

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**Abstract**

In this globalisation era, the number of people studying abroad is growing rapidly. The context of study abroad in the construction of one's second language identity itself is particularly important as for the majority of learners who are studying abroad, their efforts to engage and interact in their second language are creating natural effects in the construction of their second language identities. Sato (2014) assumed that study abroad with longer duration could lead to a more intensive experience which affects the construction of learners' second language identities differently from the shorter period. Based on that assumption, this study investigated second language identity in a long-term study abroad context; specifically, second language identity among Korean international students in Australia. The method used in this qualitative study was a narrative inquiry and for triangulation purpose, a combination of three sources of data collection was used: 1) self-reports about English language learning experience in Australia written by participants; 2) one-on-one semi-structured interviews; 3) in-class observations. Focusing on the outcomes on participants' second language competence with personal and social identity, it was found that even though all participants claimed to have developed something in their long-term SA experiences, not all participants were positively affected by it. This indicates that study abroad, despite all the positive outcomes that many people believe, is not always a good thing for learners.

Keywords: study abroad, second language identity, international students

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## **Introduction**

In this globalisation era, the ever-growing number of people studying abroad is parallel to the increase of overseas travel opportunities. The context of study abroad (SA) in the construction of one's second language (L2) identity is important (Kinginger, 2013) as for the majority of learners who are studying abroad, their efforts to engage and interact in their L2 are creating natural effects in the construction of their L2 identities. In fact, it is considered to be the major outcome of SA (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown, 2013). Sato (2014) assumed that SA with longer duration could lead to a more intensive experience which affects the construction of learners' L2 identities differently from the shorter period. Based on that assumption, this study will be discussing about L2 identity in a long-term SA context. Specifically; L2 identity among Korean international students in Australia.

Korean people are enthusiastic about English (Han, 2014; as cited in Phan, 2009; p. 207). This is supported by the fact that they held the fourth highest number of student population in terms of international students in Australia (Australia's Department of Education and Training, 2015). Thus, investigating their L2 identity as they study in Australia would add new interesting insights to this area of research. Having said that, this small study will focus on two questions: (1) how participants perceive their sense of selves through L2 development, and (2) how does study abroad affect the construction of the participants' L2 identities.

## **Literature Review**

According to Block (2007; as cited in Kinginger, 2013, p. 341), "identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future. Individuals are shaped by their socio-histories as life goes on. The entire process is conflictive as opposed to harmonious, and individuals often feel ambivalent". Similarly, Benson et al. (2013) define identity as the sense of self that evolves historically through various sides of concepts that guide people to investigate how self is being situated in the dynamism of social, cultural, and linguistics worlds. In support to this view, Yamat's (2012) qualitative research on three six-year-old Malaysian children living in the UK has shown that the combination of children's experiences in cultural diversity and their own individual characteristics were giving contributions to the constructions of their identities. This finding indicates that identity is contextual-based and therefore very dynamic.

In terms of language identity, Block (2009, p. 40) defines it as "the relationship between one's sense of self and a means of communication which might be known as a language (e.g. English), a dialect (e.g. Geordie), or a sociolect (e.g. football-speak)". Whereas second language identity is about the degree of one's development of identity in one or more additional language. Such development is concerning on one's audibility – described as "multimodal package required by a particular community of practice" (Block, 2009, p. 42) such as linguistic features, expressions, and many other kinds of semiotic behaviour related to the additional language.

By adopting the poststructuralist view of identity, Benson et al. (2013) define L2 identity as one's relationship with one or more L2s. It is linked to their knowledge and use of the L2 as part of their personal and social identity aspects. They also noted

that L2 learning has progressively become an essential variable in the constructions of identities in this postmodern era. As overseas travel becomes easier and less costly, the number of people studying abroad is only increasing. Hence, the tendency for people to engage in L2 learning is getting higher and it leads to the increase of not only identities in general, but also the construction of L2 identities as well.

Focusing on the outcomes on participants' L2 competence with personal and social identity, a number of studies found that there are both positive and negative outcomes related to the effect of SA on the construction of one's L2 identity. Phan (2009), Anwaruddin (2012), Yamat (2012), Sato (2014) and Barkhuizen (2017) pointed out in their studies that SA has many positive effects such as linguistic and intercultural developments. Phan's (2009) qualitative study on eight Asian international master students at a university in Thailand reports that all participants felt proud and superior for being able to speak English. One of them even represented herself as "successful role model" (Phan, 2009, p. 208) to other non-native English-speaking learners. As they took ownership of the language and gained positive experiences, they identified themselves in a preferable position and created meaningful senses of selves. Their identities were constructed, produced and reproduced in a dynamic way around the negotiations of English and being Asians. Likewise, other participants considered themselves as "privileged" for having the chance to learn English (Anwaruddin, 2012) and were able to gain more self-confidence (Sato, 2014). Using the three dimensions of second language identity introduced by Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown (2012), Barkhuizen's (2017) study also shown how a participant's linguistic self-concept has changed by him identifying himself as a successful user and learner of English due to socio-pragmatic success which contributed to his personal development in intercultural competence.

On the other side, other studies demonstrated that SA could also lead to negative effects such as linguistic anxiety and loss of motivation. One participant in Galucci's (2014) study reported that study abroad gave negative outcomes on the development of her second language identity due to uncomfortable learning environments and unsupportive social networks. Her difficulties got worse by her lack of efforts and commitment in L2 learning and in the end, she failed to improve her L2 and felt more attached to her home-country instead. Other cases can be seen from a study of an American in Japan who was frustrated in achieving his desired identity as a Japanese speaker because other people "consistently positioned in interaction in accordance with an outsider's status" (Benson et al., 2012, p. 178). Lastly, a study by Chik and Benson (2007; as cited in Benson et al., 2013) also revealed how a student from Hong Kong was frustrated by constantly being seen as "Chinese", "Asian", and "ESL student" during her undergraduate study in the UK.

In analysing one's development in the construction of L2 identity, Benson et al. (2012) introduced the three dimensions of L2 identity. The first dimension is *identity-related aspects of L2 proficiency*; the socio-pragmatic proficiency and the ability to enact the identity one's desired to project. The second dimension is *linguistic self-concept*; how people perceive themselves and negotiate their personal identities through L2. This includes the matters of one's self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and many more. Lastly, *L2-mediated aspects of personal development*; personal capabilities improved by SA experience and may have no relations to L2 learning or use, such as becoming more independent and acquiring intercultural

competencies. In relation to that, this current study explores these three dimensions further in the context of Korean international students in Australia.

## Methods

The method used in this qualitative research is narrative inquiry. Benson et al. (2013) pointed out that self-narratives are significant in the construction of L2 identities and effective to describe the development and changes in individuals. Moreover, it is considered to be the best way to represent the experiences/events from the perspectives of those who experienced them (Sato, 2014). For those reasons, narrative approach is considered to be the most appropriate for this research.

### 1. Participants

NAME	AGE	GENDER	MAJOR	LENGTH OF STAY
John	28	Male	Applied Linguistics and TESOL	1,5 year
Ruby	25	Female	Applied Linguistics and TESOL	1,5 year
Jenny	33	Female	Applied Linguistics and TESOL	1 year
Henry	32	Male	Applied Linguistics and TESOL	Almost 3 years

The participants in this research are four South Korean international students who were undertaking their postgraduate degrees in Australia; John, Ruby, Jenny, and Henry (all names are pseudonyms). Their age varied between 25 to 33 years old. With an equal number of male and female proportion, all of the participants were majoring in Applied Linguistics and TESOL in a university in Sydney. Three of the participants had spent more than a year in Australia, while the other participant, Jenny, had been living in Australia for one year.

### 2. Procedures

For triangulation purpose, this research is using a combination of three sources of data collection. Those are (1) self-reports about English language learning experience in Australia written by participants, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) in-class observations. Before conducting the interviews, participants were asked to write their English language learning experience and report it via email. The participants' reports were used as a baseline to arrange five main inquiries for the interviews. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were then conducted where participants asked to describe further and comment on their SA experiences and the ways in which they felt any development or changes. Arranged on a casual basis, the interviews took around 25 minutes (per person) to complete and was conducted in English. The interviews were also recorded and then transcribed and double-checked for accuracy (see appendix 2 for the transcription). In order to achieve a more rigour and credible research, in-class observations were conducted as well. In this respect, participants' actions and behaviours in class were observed for approximately 3 weeks and then noted for further analysis.

### 3. Data analysis

In order to interpret the data and find out how study abroad is affecting the participants, all the data obtained for this study was analysed using a deductive approach (theory-driven) of coding procedure. Following Benson et al.'s (2012) three main dimensions of L2 identity, the data were coded into *identity-related aspects of L2 proficiency*, *linguistic self-concept*, and *L2-mediated aspects of personal*

*competence*. The coding process was performed by using traditional techniques such as paper, pencil and highlighters. Once the data were coded with the coding scheme mentioned earlier, the code segments were organised and connected in order to obtain the appropriate interpretations.

## Results

### 1. Identity-related aspects of L2 proficiency

IMPROVEMENTS	JOHN	RUBY	JENNY	HENRY
In oral proficiency	✓	✓	✗	✓ Fluency in speaking through phone calls
In listening skills	✓	✓	✓	✓ Improvement in listening through phone calls
In reading and writing skills	✓	✓	✓	✓ Fluency in reading and writing through text messaging
Pragmatic competence	✓ Australian idioms and expressions	✓ Australian accents and expressions	✓ Australian idioms and expressions	✓

All of the participants in this research reported that their English language proficiencies had improved, especially in terms of pragmatic competence. Apart from Jenny, all participants also reported to have developed their speaking skills. First of all, Ruby claimed that she had learned and gained more knowledge about Australian accents and expressions. When she first arrived, she admitted that she could not understand 100% what people were talking about because, according to her, Australians speak really fast and have a different accent from the English that she used to learn. However, after living in Sydney for almost a year and a half, she claimed that she now could understand Australian English 100%. She also added that she learned many Australian expressions e.g. ‘heaps’ and started to use it too. Her response is captured in the following excerpt:

“I learned more about Australian accent too. When I first came, I actually couldn’t understand 100% what they’re talking about, especially Australian speak really fast, very different with the English that I used to know, but then now I can understand like almost 100%. And I learned about their expressions a lot. Like I used ‘super’ a lot ... but Australian use ‘heaps’ a lot, and I found myself using ‘heaps’ these days.”

Similar with Ruby, John pointed out that other than being able to significantly develop his English ability, he also learned many Australian idioms and expressions that he never learned in Korea before e.g. ‘no worries’.

“It’s very significant because I have never been to English speaking countries before, and the opportunities to practice in new communities and the experience, and the culture, getting into the native speaker society, experience how they behave and think. I also get many idioms and expressions that I never learn in Korea, you know, like ‘no worries’”

Lastly, Henry revealed in his self-report that he was able to improve his fluency in English conversation through text messages and telephone calls with his foreign friends. An interesting finding from this case is Jenny’s experience. Due to a large

number of compulsory readings and writing assignments from her course, she claimed that her English was improving in terms of reading, writing, and listening skills but not for her speaking skill. Jenny admitted that she gradually lost her English-speaking skill because she spent most of her time solely on her studies or assignments and had no enough spare time to spend with other people to practice her English. Her feeling is captured in the following excerpt:

“I really have not much time to spend with others ((laughs)). Actually, I am really sure that my reading and writing skills are improving now because I’m doing a lot of things in English and because this is school ((laughs)). Listening also the same. But frankly, for speaking, I feel like I’m losing my speaking skills. Because you know spending a lot of time on reading and listening, sometimes I really confuse choosing or selecting appropriate words in the speaking time. And sometimes I feel really nervous, because in Korea we learn American English but here they have different accent and spelling sometimes. So sometimes I feel nervous when I talk to Australian because they talk really fast and they use different vocabularies? So yeah.”

## 2. Linguistic self-concept

LINGUISTIC SELF-CONCEPTS	JOHN	RUBY	JENNY	HENRY
Increased Self Confidence in using English	✓	✓✓	✗	✓
Increased Self Esteem in using English	✓	✓✓	✗	✓
Increased Motivation in using English	✓	✓✓	✓	✗

In terms of linguistic self-concept, John and Ruby reported that they had become more motivated and more self-confident in using English, especially in speaking and understanding others. Ruby stated that she felt more motivated about English, really confident, and really comfortable in using it. In fact, she felt too comfortable that sometimes she’s worried about her Korean language because she rarely used it in her daily activities. To add, the observation results also indicate that Ruby had obtained positive outcomes on her linguistic self-concept by behaving proactively in class. Her response is captured in the following excerpt:

“I feel more motivated about English, and I feel really comfortable and really confident about using English. And like sometimes it makes me worry about my Korean actually ((laughs)) cause I rarely speak Korean. Like really. I only speak Korean with my parents maybe.”

Likewise, John claimed that the more information and experience he gained the more motivated he felt to learn English. He also acknowledged that grammar and reading skills were not the most important skills as he learned that many native speakers made that mistakes too. He explained that his self-esteem was increased, he made more friends with English native speakers and also discussed some topics based on Biblical principles with native speakers from his Christian society. His response is captured in the following excerpt:

“but sometimes even native speakers make grammatical mistakes too. So, yeah grammar is important, but speaking is also important. when I taught student in Korea, I think 10% I spoke in English and 90% in Korean. I realise I spoke too less during the class, so when I’m going back, and if I teach student again I will use English more, at least 40%.”

In contrast, Jenny reported that she felt a deterioration in her self-confidence to speak English. She explained that she used to practice English more when she was in Korea with her foreign colleagues than when she was in Australia. In Australia, she felt really nervous to talk to Australians because they speak really fast and have different accents and expressions. She also added that sometimes she could not distinguish written language with spoken language and often felt confused in selecting the appropriate words to communicate in English with other people. However, she argued that she was motivated to improve her English-speaking skill because English had become part of her daily life and not just a subject to learn. Her feelings are captured in the following excerpts:

“Because you know spending a lot of time on reading and listening, sometimes I really confuse choosing or selecting appropriate words in the speaking time. And sometimes I feel really nervous, because in Korea we learn American English but here they have different accent and spelling sometimes. So sometimes I feel nervous when I talk to Australian because they talk really fast and they use different vocabularies? So yeah”

“(in Korea) I used to work with foreign teachers that’s why I have to speak English every day and every time to share ideas or to tell them about the children and their moms. And here ((laughs)) is quite different ... Yea and you know in Korea I used the simple words, the common words to communicate with others. But here sometimes I really need to know how to use special terms in the classroom ((laughs))”

On the other hand, Henry admitted that he became less motivated in learning English. He admitted that it was hard for him to stay motivated to learn English like he used to because of financial problem and false expectations. He stated that even though he really wanted to speak English well, his decision to enrol in a postgraduate program was wrong and he decided to give up. His statements were supported by the observation results which he was found to never attend the lectures and rarely communicate with other students. Nonetheless, Henry claimed that as he lived in Australia his fear of speaking English that he used to have when he was in Korea had disappeared and he became more confident. His responses are captured in the following excerpts:

“In my case, it’s so hard actually. Cause I should work and study at the same time to pay tuition fee, it’s much higher than my country. And even I’m in Australia, I actually don’t speak English everyday cause(.) of my situation. Actually↓ I tried to be exposed to English environment, especially I bought TV and also sometimes I played radio when I drive, but now, I think a::h I think I give up ((laughs)) yeah give up to get many information(.) and the environment with English. So technically, I want to learn English, but because of my situation I cannot focus on this right now. So if I financially don’t have any problem, then I think Australia is good environment to learn English.”

“Yeah, there are some things you should know. This one is, <I really want to speak English well> but(.) the course(.) that we are on(.) a::h it’s not related to improve

my English skills. There's a lot of readings and writings, and I think I misunderstood that if I through this course I can be a good English speaker, but this course is just to be a good teacher. Not good English speaker. So they kind of different, between(.) truth and my expectation. Yeah, but it's my problem. My mistake, not the course. I don't wanna blame. It's me going to the wrong way. Yeah, I thought university here is just almost same with Korea. Cause in Korea they only focus on the English reading and writing."

"Korean has a kind of fear of speaking because of their grammatical problem, yeah, all English course and English test go with some kind of assessment which correct their grammars, so they kind of fear that you can make some kind of mistake when you speak English. And for me, that disappear in Australia."

### 3. *L2-mediated personal development*

John, Ruby, and Jenny mentioned that their SA experiences had helped them to be more open-minded, tolerant of other cultures, and more independent. With the exception of Jenny, all participants also claimed to have gained more self-confidence. John explained that his SA experience had made him became more independent as he looked after himself more and did everything on his own. He added that his biggest personal development in Australia was being more tolerant towards different cultures because he never experienced such a big cultural diversity when he was in Korea. With similar reason, Ruby admitted that her view about the world was broadened and made her felt really motivated and competitive in a positive way. She claimed that her biggest personal development was to become more concern with her future career and began to plan for a doctoral degree in Australia. Some of their responses are captured in the following excerpts:

"I think I got more open minded yeah and also become more tolerant. Tolerate of variety, because in Korea I think more than 90% are Koreans so there is no cultural and ethnical variety in Korea. They are not familiar with foreigners. Not like in here. And I think I also become more independent o:h for example when I need something I do everything myself in here and it's another kind of adventure." – John

"In Australia I planned a lot more about my future though. Maybe it's because of my age, it's time to plan something. And of course, my future is related to English and linguistics. I think the fact that I had designed a five-year long future plan for PhD here is the biggest impact. And I think it's also because different cultures in Australia kinda makes me feel like really competitive and see the world bigger and wider, and it motivates me as well." – Ruby

However, in Jenny's case, she believed that her study abroad experience had affected her personal development both in good and bad ways. According to her, it was good because she gained more knowledge of other cultures, but it was also bad because her confidence was deteriorated. Her response is captured in the following excerpt:

"Intercultural competences. Because Korea is a monolingual country and Australia has many people from other culture and use different language. I become more open minded. But it's (affecting in a) good way but sometimes I also feel like it's affecting me in a bad way. I agree that living in Australia is quite good opportunity to speak English in real life, everyday life. But maybe for me, as a master student, I don't have enough time to speak or you know because I told you spend a lot of time for reading and listening, so sometimes for someone like me, I get confused



on what is written language and what is speaking language. We have to know the differences but sometimes it's confusing me.”

## Discussion

Findings revealed that all of the participants' responses were in accordance with Benson et al.'s (2012) three main dimensions of L2 identity which are *identity-related aspects of L2 proficiency*, *linguistic self-concept*, and *L2-mediated personal development*. Even though each participant did not have the exact same kind of outcomes, all of them, especially John and Ruby, reported some positive developments along all of the three dimensions. Agreeing with Sato's (2014) assumption, this finding indicates that the context of long-term study abroad was indeed filled with intense opportunities for the development of the participants' L2 identities.

This study is addressing two research questions. The first one is how participants perceive their sense of selves through their L2 development. Findings showed that all of the participants in this research were able to describe what they had been able to do with English and how they improved their English proficiency while studying abroad, especially John and Ruby. As the acquisition and use of pragmatic competencies are highly related to the kind of identities one wishes to project (Benson, et al., 2013), both John and Ruby had explicitly articulated how their enhanced competencies were related to their ability to express their desired identities. For instance, Ruby argued that there was no other way than to learn English for her, because “*if you wanna live in Australia you have to learn English otherwise it's hard to live in Australia*”. Her English proficiency and the high level of tendency she had in using English had led her to project a strong identity as an English user. However, at the same time, it had also led her to project an unstable identity as a Korean. Nonetheless, both Ruby and John had positively developed their English skills to the level where they were able to function in English and project the identities that they desired and that English speakers around them would want to interact and make friends with. On the other hand, Jenny and Henry were unable to perceive themselves as how they wanted their identities as L2 users to be projected due to false expectation and loss of confidence.

In regard to the second research question, studies indicate that, of all participants, it is evident that John and Ruby's changes in attitudes and orientations towards English and study abroad had the most positive effects on the enactment of their L2 identities. For the other two participants, Jenny and Henry, despite the positive developments they had gained, they admitted that SA had also affected them negatively, especially in Henry's case. Both of them struggled for acceptance in their society as their access to ‘symbolic resources’ (Galucci, 2014, p. 932) such as friendship and interactions with native speakers, was jeopardized by the loss of self-confidence (Jenny) and false expectations (Henry). It is apparent that Jenny and Henry's experiences in Australia had affected the way they perceive SA and changed their initially positive attitudes towards learning and using English into negative attitudes. Consequently, their negative attitudes then had negatively affected their sense of selves and the enactment of their L2 identities; Jenny lost her confidence to speak English and Henry lost his motivation to learn English.

In relevance with Galucci's (2014) study, the results from this study have also shown that identity is a dynamic evolution which highly influenced by the way people perceive their sociocultural environments and construct their relationships to the new context around them over time and across space. Therefore, as demonstrated by the participants, one person would obtain different outcomes from another person depending on their own selves and their environments.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presents a small-scale study which focused solely on the effect of long-term SA. The findings showed that even though all participants claimed to have developed something in their long-term SA experiences, not all participants were positively affected by it. This indicates that SA, despite all the positive outcomes that many people believe, is not always a good thing for learners. The findings from this study could be useful for L2 learners and educators to deepen their understandings of L2 identity and be more aware of its dynamism and the different ways it might be affected. Moreover, despite the limited works of literature, the study of L2 identity in the context study abroad is very wide and requires more investigation in various other aspects. Hence, further investigation in this field is very encouraged.

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