

Undergraduate Students' Reflection on Willingness to Communicate Throughout Study Abroad Experience: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

As the number of Japanese students who study abroad (SA) has dramatically increased, more attention has been devoted to studies on Japanese students' SA in the field of SLA (JASSO, 2017; Sasaki, 2011; Yashima, 2013). Though previous literature has focused mainly on linguistic development as an outcome of SA (Kinginger, 2009), only a few studies investigated such non-linguistic outcomes as anxiety (Allen & Herron, 2003) and motivation for foreign language learning (Cubillos & Ileveto, 2012; Sasaki, 2007). One of the most notable areas of non-linguistic outcome is the development of willingness to communicate (WTC; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998), which can largely influence students' language use during SA experiences (Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008). These studies, however, have failed to detect what kind of experience students have during SA and how it consequently influences their WTC. To fill the gap, this study aims to explore what kind of SA experience students had during SA and how it influenced students' WTC at a particular situation inductively. Specifically, this study focuses on out-of-class activities, which have been ignored in the existing literature, as opposed to in-class activities.

2. Literature Review

2-1. Previous studies on SA

A considerable number of studies have conducted research on SA, which means that students stay in a target language community for a while in order to study something. The length of SA investigated by the previous studies varies: one month (Castaneda & Zirger, 2011), a term (Dressler & Dressler, 2016; Ellis & Tanaka, 2003), one academic year (Ueki & Takeuchi, 2015) to multiple years (Chirkov, Safdar, Guzman & Playford, 2008).

Despite the varied length of the sojourn, several studies commonly reported that SA is highly effective for learners' linguistic development such as speaking fluency (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Hernandez, 2010; Juan-Garau & Perez-Vidal, 2007; O'Brien, Segalowitz, Freed, & Collentine,

2007), suprasegmentals (Terry, 2017), and listening strategies (Cubillos, Chieffo, & Fan, 2008). On the other hand, though it is also revealed that SA experience is effective for non-linguistic aspects, such as reducing anxiety (Allen & Herron, 2003), increasing motivation for learning English (Kormos, Csizer, & Iwaniec, 2014; Sasaki, 2007; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2015) and developing WTC (D'Amico, 2010; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008), it receives less attention from researchers, compared to that of linguistic aspects. Previous literature has reached the consensus that non-linguistic aspects including learners' affective aspects significantly influence their second language (L2) use (Allen & Herron, 2003; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008). Building on this consensus, it is plausible to argue that such affective aspects can determine the amount of L2 use during SA and consequently linguistic outcomes from SA. Thus, it is arguably worth investigating how affective aspects change during their SA experiences as well as how their linguistic aspects develop.

Methodologically speaking, a quantitative approach is widely used to address the effects of SA (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Sasaki, 2007), which is effective for investigating the product of SA but is hard for this type of approach to explore learners' experiences of SA in detail. However, these studies could not describe what kind of experiences learners had during their sojourn and how these experiences influence the development of the learners' learning, whether linguistic or non-linguistic development (Kinginger, 2009).

2-2. L2WTC

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has been defined as the probability of one's communication when he/she can make a choice of whether they participate in the communication or not (McCroskey & Baer, 1985). In early research, WTC was investigated in the context of first language (L1) communication; however, due to the increasing emphasis on authentic communication in SLA, the research context of WTC has also been expanded to communication in L2 (Kang, 2005), which is particularly called L2WTC. Regarding L2WTC, MacIntyre and Charos (1996) re-defined WTC as a predictor of one's engagement in communication in L2; that is, if learners have high WTC, they are supposed to be more likely to engage in communication in their L2 than those with low WTC.

The first model of L2WTC, called the pyramid model, is proposed by MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998), who considered that L2WTC is constructed with 12 variables, including psychological variables, such as motivation and anxiety, and social contextual variables. With these variables interacting, WTC is created and maintained in a particular situation. Therefore, in this view, WTC is contextually situated, meaning that it can vary across different situations. Additionally, in this model, it is confirmed that learners' WTC is directly related to their actual target language use, which is validated by past studies (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

During the past one decade, many studies have attempted to reveal which variables constitute learners' WTC, using statistical analysis. In this line of studies, many researchers studied the relationships among WTC, motivation, and environmental factors (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2000; Osterman, 2014; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). For Japanese EFL learners, Yashima (2002) found that WTC and motivation are indirectly related with other variables as moderator variables for the relationship.

On the other hand, a few studies have employed qualitative methods which enable researchers to see WTC as the complicated and dynamic construct more in detail Kang (2005), who explored the WTC of Korean students studying English in the US as a part of a conversation programme, argues that EFL learners' WTC is constructed by the following three elements: senses of security, excitement, and responsibility. Furthermore, it is plausible that these psychological antecedents and the contextual factors interact with each other and create one's situational WTC, which confirms the dynamic and complex nature of WTC (Cao, 2011; Yue, 2014).

More recently, dynamic WTC is also proposed by several researchers (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Yue, 2014). From this point of view, it is assumed that learners' WTC changes moment by moment, meaning that it can change even within the communication between the same persons. Therefore, when it comes to explore learners' WTC, it is necessary to take the contextual factors into consideration.

2-3. WTC in SA context

Compared to their home country settings, EFL learners are supposed to gain more opportunities to use the target language, so that it is worth studying WTC, which is directly related to learners' language use (MacIntyre et al., 1998) and is essential for language mastery (Peng, 2016). However, a limited number of studies have addressed WTC as an outcome of SA settings, compared to other psychological variables (e.g., motivation and anxiety). Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) statistically revealed that Japanese students who experience SA could gain higher proficiency levels, higher WTC, and international posture, which may lead to learners' positive attitudes towards international affairs (Yashima, 2002). In addition, D'Amico (2010) replicated their study and obtained the same results. However, in these studies, it was not clarified what kind of students' experiences during their sojourn influenced the fluctuation of WTC, which can contribute to clarify the importance of SA experiences in terms of influencing students' language learning though.

It is dramatically increased especially for international students from EFL countries, e.g. Japan, to use the target language in SA setting where they are required to use it to communicate with others as a daily basis. Therefore, it is strongly necessary to investigate students' WTC out-of-class setting, in SA, though the empirical studies have focused on in-class settings (Cao, 2011; Osterman, 2014; Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

Furthermore, in past literatures on WTC, motivation-related variables have extensively received researchers' attention, including interpersonal motivation, which is a subordinate concept of WTC, defined as "the desire to communicate with a specific person and the state of communicative self-confidence" (Kang, 2005, p. 279), meaning that interlocutors can influence one's WTC (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001). Therefore, from this viewpoint, it could be assumed that depending on interlocutors, learners' WTC always has a dynamic nature. In SA contexts, learners will have many opportunities to interact with other students from all over the world in the host country, which will make it more important to investigate interpersonal motivation in SA contexts.

To fill the gaps of the empirical studies, such as the lack of describing the details of students' SA experiences and the dynamics of their WTC in SA setting, this case study aims to clarify how WTC of Japanese university students, especially their interpersonal motivation during their one-academic year SA experiences, will undergo changes caused by their out-of-class experiences. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do students engage in L2 communication during their study abroad experiences?
2. How does students' interpersonal motivation differ across situations?
3. How does their interpersonal motivation influence their actual L2 use?

3. Methodology

This study aims to reveal the relationship between learners' experiences during SA and their interpersonal motivation, which is the subordinate of WTC. In this study there are two sections; the first part describes all the participants' experiences, and the second part focuses on Emi's experiences as a focal participant in detail as she has finished her SA most recently, and has the freshest memory about her SA.

Four Japanese female undergraduate students participated in the current study, as described in Table 1. Three of them studied abroad in the US, and the remaining one did in Sweden. All of them studied abroad through an exchange programme in order to study their major area, either second language acquisition or education.

Ai, Kumi, and Miki were interviewed orally individually once after their SA by either the first or the second author. As for Emi, we have two semi-structured interviews as a focal interviewer. The first interview was conducted in June 2017, and the second one was done eight months after the first one. Each interview lasted about 90 to 120 minutes. In the interview, the researchers asked to the participants as follows; their language learning background, the reasons for the current SA, the purposes for

Table 1 The List of the Participants (Pseudonymous)

	Country	Term	Year	Age
Ai	Sweden	2015–2016	5th	22
Emi	USA	2016–2017	4th	21
Kumi	USA	2015–2016	5th	22
Miki	USA	2015–2016	5th	23

the current SA, the memorable experiences during SA, experiences in classroom during SA, experiences in an accommodation, their willingness to communicate in-class and out-of-class.

All questions are created based on previous studies, in terms of SA (Allen & Herron, 2003; Kormos, Csizer, & Iwaniec, 2014), relationships with friends (McFaul, 2016), and WTC (Kang, 2005). The questions were checked through the pilot study conducted by the first author to a student who have studied abroad in the US for one year for academic purposes. In the analysis phase, firstly, all the interview data were transcribed by both of the authors. Then, we examined the transcription of the interview carefully for several times and analysed the data inductively by doing open-coding. Next, the authors categorised these open-codes into several groups, in terms of the participants' experiences in order to investigate what kind of experiences students had and how they reacted to the experiences.

4. Findings

There are six themes emerged from the analysis, such as the sense of responsibility, interest in the topic and the person, the sense of self-esteem, something shared between the student and the interlocutor, the sense of security, and confidence towards using English. This section describes how these themes are appeared in the participant's interview, as well as answering the research questions. Because of the characteristic of this qualitative study, the research questions are intricately entangled, so that the authors will answer the research questions in an integrative manner, rather than answering one by one. In addition, because of the limited space of the paper, the authors focus on the first three themes which are all related to Emi's case revealed through the focal interview.

Table 2 shows the three students' experiences of the target language use that students had during their SA. From this table, the students' experiences are very various even though their purpose of the SA is the same. Additionally, Kumi and Miki studied abroad in America, their experiences are very different. For example, Kumi organised by herself the social community where various students can meet up and talk about their own thoughts. On the other hand, Miki joined the club activity as a committee member in order to increase the opportunities to use English. Therefore, it could be said that Kumi and Miki both take the administration role in the community where they belonged; however the topic

Table 2 Three Participants' Experiences of Language Use Out-of-Classroom Context

	Kumi	Miki	Ai
Place	University	University	University
Time	All the time during SA	All the time during SA	First three months
Topic	Future career Her belief, thoughts	Club activity (administration)	Running project
Interlocutor	Friends (sharing the same thoughts)	Friends (in a club activity)	Friends (from a Middle Eastern country)
Purpose	To share her own mind To understand herself	To practice her English To enjoy her SA	To run the project to share the reality of Middle Eastern countries

Table 3 Emi's Experiences During Her SA

	Experiences during SA		
	Organising the event	Tutoring	Chatting with Asian American friends
Place	University	University	University/ Off-campus
Time	Second term	Second term	All the time during SA
Topic	Running the project	Teaching Japanese (JPN) Introducing JPN culture	Difference between students with immigrant background and interna- tional students
Interlocutor	Students learning JPN as foreign language	Students learning JPN as foreign language	Asian-American friends
Purpose	To introduce JPN culture	To teach JPN	To have a daily conversation

and the interlocutors of their target language use differ considerably.

As Emi had the focal interview, her experience during SA is described separately from other three, shown in Table 3. From this table, it could be said that even within a single person, the language use experiences and the interlocutor of the communication are different from situation to situation.

4-1. The sense of responsibility

The sense of responsibility is strongly related to students' interpersonal motivation and WTC, which is reflected in Emi and Miki's case. Each participant's experience will be described in detail below.

Emi ran the project about Japanese culture from the beginning of SA to that of end. The project was about a Japanese food festival at her university because she became interested in sharing Japanese culture with other people through her tutoring experience to teach Japanese to the students who learned it as a foreign language, described in the section 4-3. During the project, she sometimes

faced language difficulties. She needed to cook some Japanese food at the food festival, so that it was necessary for her to ask the staff of the kitchen to buy something. Because of her status in the community, as an international student and an Asian student, some of the staff members did not respond to her email. Furthermore, the staff members were sometimes dishonest to her, which made it difficult to run the event as one of the organisers. So that she had low interpersonal motivation towards them.

However, because of her strong sense of responsibility towards her role as an organiser, which encouraged her to put continuous efforts, she successfully communicated with them. Therefore, it could be said that even though the student's interpersonal motivation is relatively low, this sense of responsibility can enhance student's engagement in communication in L2.

Meanwhile, Miki had an experience of a translator at a conference during her engagement in the marching-band club activity, one of the out-of-class activities, as is described in Table 2. This experience let her have a sense of responsibility to translate English into Japanese without any mistakes. In this case, she paid much attention to what both speaker of English and that of Japanese said at that moment in order to complete her role as a translator who made the communication between them smoother, meaning that she had high interpersonal motivation towards both speakers. Thus, her high sense of responsibility enhanced her interpersonal motivation, which leads her to have more positive attitude towards communication there.

This finding, i.e. the relationship between the sense of responsibility and WTC confirms what is revealed by Kang (2005), who explored WTC qualitatively. In the empirical study, it is shown that when speakers feel the responsibility to the content of communication, they tend to be willingly to engage in it. Moreover, the current study shows that students' sense of responsibility and interpersonal motivation are also related tightly, which is reflected on their target language use during their communication.

4-2. Interest in the topic and the person

When the students get interested in the topic or the person, they tend to engage in the communication actively. This is represented by Emi's and Ai's cases which are shown below.

As for Emi, she did not feel any hesitation to use the target language when she engaged the communication with Asian American friends, because she had strong feeling towards them due to her strong interest in inequality which her friends experienced. Even in her second interview, she told that she was keen to know how to resolve this problem. These her strong consideration and personal interests in the two friends, described as high interpersonal motivation, could make it possible to engage in communication without hesitation.

Ai also represents the same thing as what is shown in Emi's case. When she heard the life story of one of her male friends from the Middle Eastern country for the first time at the initial phase of

her SA, she was very impressed with his story and get more interested in him. At the same time, she became motivated to know the person himself, which is reflected in her high interpersonal motivation. Additionally, with the story she heard, she also became interested in the inequality of the opportunity to study and live, which made her have a sense of mission to share the reality of the refugees with people all around the world through creating the documentary film. These her high motivation and high interpersonal motivation pushed her to launch the project about the reality of the country which the male friend is from.

To create a documentary film can be difficult for L2 learners, as it could involve doing research about the background history of refugees, making several interviews to the male friend and editing the film with her friends supporting this documentary project. However, her strong interpersonal motivation towards the male friend and strong interests in the topic, i.e. the reality of the Middle Eastern country encouraged her to use English without any negative attitude, such as anxiety nor hesitation. In the interview, when Ai was asked to describe her perceptions to willingness to communicate during her documentary project, it was very positive, such as no anxiety, speaking English very fluently. She told as the following;

Excerpt 1 (translated by the authors)

“At that time, I thought it'd be fine to speak Japanese, but tried to speak English as much as I could.”

In her project, there were some other Japanese students collaborating with her. Due to this context, she thought there was no problem to use Japanese to communicate. However, according to her, there were several students who could not understand Japanese, so that she tried to use English as much as possible. Based on the definition of MacIntyre and Charos (1996), i.e. whether one participates in communication or not, it could be said that her WTC is high because though she could choose whether she communicates either in Japanese or in English, she intentionally chooses to do so in English. Moreover, this high WTC could be coming from her interpersonal motivation to communicate with the interlocutors who cannot understand her L1, meaning that her interpersonal motivation towards the people cooperating with her encouraged her to use English with the clear intention.

4-3. The sense of self-esteem

When a student satisfies his/ her sense of self-esteem, he/ she engages in the communication more actively, which is described in Emi's case.

She did tutoring for an assignment of a class she took during her SA experience to see how the theory of language learning works in an actual learners' language learning, so that she did not have high

motivation for doing this at the beginning of this tutoring experience. However, through the tutoring experience, she felt satisfied her self-esteem as a tutor by seeing the students' language learning development. She remembers her memory of tutoring as follows;

Excerpt 2 (translated by the authors)

"Though many of the students I tutored were assigned as a part of their class requirements, so that their initial motivation for learning Japanese was not high. ... But throughout my tutoring, it seems that they gained motivation, so I feel that my tutoring had an effect on their learning."

As the time went by, she became more interested in the development of the learners and satisfied her self-esteem as a tutor, which motivated her to communicate with them at that moment, meaning that she could increase her interpersonal motivation towards them, which encouraged her to engage in the communication actively. There is no empirical study explored the relationship among self-esteem, interpersonal motivation, and WTC. However, it could be said that when learners feel that they are helpful for someone, they may gain confidence towards their own English, as they perceive that they could help others with their own English.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that though the purpose of their engagement in the community is superficially identical, their perception of WTC, especially in terms of interpersonal motivation is very different. This findings suggest that as a previous literature (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011) shows, WTC can be characterized as both state-like and fluid nature, which means that it always changes according to the context. Hence, in order to reveal WTC in a certain context, qualitative studies, such as interviews and diaries which enable researchers to explore the students' perceptions and the experiences in detail, will be suitable.

In addition, it is revealed that the reason why the students had such different interpersonal motivation could be explained by the wide variety of their experiences. Even within a single case, they sometimes felt sense of responsibility which encouraged them to communicate in the target language more actively, but they sometimes did not, as is described in Emi's case. Whether she felt such sense or not might be related to the relationship with the interlocutor because she felt responsibility when she was engaged in the organisation of the event; on the other hand, she did not feel so when chatting with her friends. Therefore, the dynamic and complex relationship between students' target language use and how they feel is necessary to be considered, which is one of the contributions of the current study.

Furthermore, this study suggests that interpersonal motivation could influence one's perception of

WTC, as is discussed by MacIntyre and Legatto (2011), who proposed that the relationship with the interlocutor influences one's WTC. However, interpersonal motivation might be the mediator between the two elements, which could be expected to be explored in future studies.

This study has several findings, however there are still some limitations. First, the second interview was conducted only with one participant, which may have made it hard to compare all the participants equally, because one-shot interview sometimes cannot take the whole picture of a specific person. Second, in order to increase the credibility of the study, ideally the member-checking should have been completed not only between the researchers but also with each participant. This procedure will be helpful to check whether the researchers' interpretation is the same as what the participants intend to describe during the interview.

Despite several limitations, this study supports that WTC is unique to each learner and even within learners it may vary from context to context. For the future direction, it could be explored how one's WTC, especially one's interpersonal motivation is changed over SA experiences in relation to the change in the relationship with other people. In addition, WTC should be considered in relation to the notion which are found in this study but not in the empirical study, i.e. the sense of self-esteem in detail in the future studies.

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