The Relationship between Identity and
a Good Language Learner

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1．Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between identity and a good language learner. I focus on what factors had an effect on a student's identity construction in the study abroad (SA) context and how these factors contribute to enhancing his language learning. Although a large amount of research about identity in SA has already been conducted, Block (2007, p. 185) states that there is a need for further exploration in this field, involving various gender and nationality combinations, in particular such as Japanese men in foreign contexts. Therefore, I interviewed a male Japanese Ph.D. visiting student in the UK, because most Japanese research subjects in SA contexts have previously been women in the US or Australia (Skarin, 2001; Block, 2006; Piller &Takahashi, 2006).

Between the 1990s and 2000s, the image of students in SA has changed from that of passive students to that of active students, thanks to Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, and Street (2001) (cited in Block 2007, p. 147). This study targets British undergraduate students on Year Abroad Program. However, little is known about these kinds of active students in other settings. The Japanese male subject whom I interviewed can be considered an active student because he assertively and enthusiastically collected data for his doctoral thesis within his host country. Therefore, this study will focus upon not only an example of Japanese male students in the study abroad context but also upon an active student. In this essay, I will explore a Japanese male students' identity construction in SA contexts and an active student as a good language learner. I begin by reviewing the literature, and provide an overview of what constitutes 'a good language learner'. I subsequently consider post-structualist' concepts related to identity such as positioning and community of practice to analyze his identity formation. A notable researcher in the field of language and identity, Block(2007) utilized the post- structuralism-inflected approach. I adopted the same approach to analyze the data.

Then, I will present the methodology which I used to collect data. Next, I will survey the subject's life history and motivation before study in the UK which seemed to have an effect on his language learning. Dornyei (2009, p. 218) states that 'in existing research on language motivation, context or culture is located externally, as something pre-existing, a stable independent background variable, outside

the individual' In contrast, my essay focus on 'person in context' and reveal the motivation of a good language learner in a particular context. Then, I will evaluate his identity construction from the above post-structualists' key perspectives, his religious background and cultural one. Finally, I will conclude the findings on the subject's identity's formation and the necessary elements of being a good language learner in a particular context. I will briefly describe between the identity construction of the male Japanese student in this paper and that of the female Japanese student in the previous research

2. Discussion

2.1 The Previous Research of Good language Learner

Previous research on the good language learner's strategies was conducted between the 1970s and the 1980s focusing on linguistic perspectives, according to Norton (2000). There was a kind of myth that by examining strategies which good language learners' use, suitable solutions would be found to make low proficiency learners become good language learners. However, what is strategy? If strategies can be identified, it is impossible to apply these strategies of successful learners to all the language learners because of the different learners' personality and different environments. In recent studies, the interest towards a good language learner among researchers has shifted to the notion of the self-regulated learner. On the other hand, current research (Angelil Carter 1997; Goldstein, 1996; Harklau, 2000, McKay and Wong, 1996; Morgan, 1998; Norton, 1997, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995; Siegel, 1996; Stein, 1998 cited in Block 2007) has highlighted the relationship between identity and language learning, which suggests that the process of language learning is more complicated. Most researchers pay attention to the inequality between the native speakers and the language learner. Norton (2001), for example, observes the necessary key element of 'social resources' (which involves having opportunity to interact with speakers of the target language) as the means for good language learners. For instance, in Bremer *et al* (1996), a Chilean woman in Paris faced difficulties in communicating with native speakers of French because of lack of the chance to talk with native speakers since migrants tend to be looked upon as inadequate interlocutor. Norton (2000, p. 135) also points out that most immigrant women have trouble in accessing to Anglophone social networks.

3. Theoretical Overview

3.1 Community of Practice

The concept of 'Community of Practice' was proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Human beings are constantly involved in various formal or informal communities such as schools, offices and homes (cited in Smith 2003). Through participating in these communities, people construct identities, through mutual engagement, joint enterprises, and 'shared repertoires', according to Wenger (1998, p. 4). He emphasiz-

es the importance of 'shared repertoires' for newcomers to keep good relationship with other members of the community.

> The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice. (Wenger 1998, p. 83)

Within community of practice theory, learning seems to be situated in a particular context imparting knowledge, vocabulary and artefacts and it is not individual behaviour but a basic social phenomenon. New participants actively need to take part in on-going processes of practice, and share the history of learning in order to be admitted as a member of the community and to build an identity in relation to the community in which they are engaged.

According to Block (2007), some researchers state that language learners often try to take their place within 'imagined' communities of speakers of the target language in the process of language learning. Language learners' identities would, therefore, never be stable. Instead, they are constantly changing. Wenger's concept of imagination (1998) is used in defining the term 'Positioning' by some researchers.

> The concept of imagination refers to a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves. Imagination in this sense is looking at an apple and seed and a tree. (Wenger, 1998, p. 176)

3.2 Positioning

Davis and Harre (1999, p. 37) define the concept of positioning as "the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines". They say "there can be interactive positioning in which what a person says positions another." Block (2007) explains the relationship between positioning theory and identity. According to him, 'Positioning' involves day-to-day activities in relation to which people always position themselves, and they are positioned by other interlocutors depending on the time, the place and the nature of the activity. Therefore, this contributes to making human beings defined and redefined. Positioning is mainly a conversational phenomenon which involves social interaction. People are characterized in a conversation and the subject position is understood in terms of which role he or she takes part in. Hearers and speakers negotiate and create new positions through the process of conversation and they engage in constant changes across space and time (Davis and Harre, 1999, p. 52). Positioning theory has been utilized to explain language learners' subject positions, which have a part in the construction of both past

and future identity.

4. Methodology

I asked my colleague to cooperate with my interview because I regard him as a good language learner. He has presented a paper at an international conference of a famous academic society which was held at Oxford University on 31st, March, 2012 for which some British students of the university were not selected as presenters.

I explained the aim of my study face to face. After showing the content of interview questions, I asked the subject whether he can cooperate with my study or not. I conducted one-to one interview with a semi structured interview. . It took about an hour to interview the participant and I recorded all the speeches and transcribed it. The participant chose to speak English rather than his first language because he wanted to show his opinion in English to prepare for participating in an international academic conference. The participant's utterances were examined from the perspectives of the frame work presented earlier in this essay.

5. Ken's life history before study in the UK

5.1 Family background

Ken was born in a middle-class family in Hiroshima, in western Japan. His father was a professor at a university and his mother was a housewife. Later, she started to write some books about Rudolf Steiner's education after he graduated from elementary school. His parents were intelligent and there were numerous different books on their bookshelves as Ken grew up. He was forbidden to play computer game and came to like reading books. From Skegg's point of view (1997), it seems that he inherited abundant 'cultural capitals' from his parents and he naturally experienced English literature. Due to his father's influence, his language identity for English was positively cultivated.

> My father is really strict person. Actually, as he was too strict for me, I chose to enter Tohoku University, a famous national university in the northern region of Japan to be free from him. He always read or studied something for long hours. I was also interested what kind of books attracted him so much, so I started to read technical books which is related to education, philosophy and English literature.

5.2 Living in Austria

The most prominent change in his life was to live in Austria for one year for his father's research and to go to a Steiner School. In the beginning, he couldn't speak Austria's official language, German or its

second language, English at all. As he attended classes at the school and made some native speaker friends, his German and English proficiency rapidly developed. In this period, he enjoyed playing sports with his friends and communicating with them. Referring to Dornyei reword (2010), 'integrative motivation' (interest in foreign language caused by interacting with speakers of the target language) was aroused in Ken's language identity. At the same time he unconsciously seemed to understand the importance of having 'social resources' (to have opportunity to communicate with native speakers) in order to learn foreign language.

I lived in Austria when I was 9 years old because my father had researched Steiner Schools in German for one year. I started to learn German before entering the school for just one month. My father hired a private German teacher and I went to her house, but of course, it was not enough to speak German fluently in new school. At first, I couldn't understand what teacher and my classmates said at all. I felt anxiety and frustrated at that time. I also attended English class twice or three times a week in the school. Comparing to learning German, English was unfamiliar language for all the students and we played card games and sang a song by using English. It was really enjoyable time for me. One day, I made some nice shoot during dochi ball game (Japanese playing ball game). After that, all my male classmates suddenly respected me and invited me to their home almost every day and enjoyed talking, eating local foods, such as Vienna schnitzel. Gradually, my speaking German skill had been better since then.

5.3 Motivation for study abroad

The second significant turning point in Ken's life is that he chose philosophy as his major for undergraduate study and subsequently entered a master course entitled Education and Philosophy. To obtain various advises from a famous professor for his doctoral thesis and improve his speaking English skills to present his article at international academic societies, he decided to study at the Institute of Education, University of London.

IOE students gave a presentation at my university two years ago. Next year I did at IOE but unfortunately, at that time, my speaking skill was horrible. During discussion time, I couldn't answer the questions from British Ph.D. students at all. I was just at a loss. Then I was vexed at my own lack of speaking skill. If I could speak English more fluently, I would have exchanged idea about my paper and received useful feedback from them. Fortunately, I could make acquaintance with Michel (fictitious name), my current supervisor of IOE. ……. After the conference, I contacted him and asked him if I could join Ph.D course as a visitor student……. I suppose he is quite familiar with recent

research trend about Kant in Europe. ……. so I think it's better for me to study in his place. Also, If I could write an article in English, more scholars in the world would read it and I think, I would show the result of my research to the world.

He thinks Japan is peripheral country in academia because international academic conferences tend to be held in European countries and most academic articles written by scholars around the world are written in English. His identity as a researcher extended his motivation towards English, and he seeks to be integrated into inner circles of academia which are controlled by Anglophone countries.

On the other hand, Nakata (2006, p. 166) insists that 'there is a general consensus that the educational system has resulted in Japanese learners with weak English communication ability and low motivation to learn English or for that matter, any foreign language'. However, Ken's motivation cannot be categorized to like that of word general Japanese learners of English. Considering the 'process-oriented perspective', Ken's intrinsic motivation to research in gatekeeping countries is robust.

6. Ken's Identity: study in the UK

6.1 Community of Practice

Block says (2007, p. 25) that 'in order to participate in particular communities of practice, the individual needs to have acquired or accumulated sufficient and appropriate 'cultural capital'.' Ken had already obtained 'cultural capital' in his home country through studying appropriate philosophical concepts, and he easily adapted him to his new community through using the shared terminology such as words like 'ontology' and 'epistemology' and he could participate in routines of his doctoral course because he became used to utilizing philosophical jargon at his university in Japan, had plenty of existing knowledge in the field of philosophy and realized how important seminars are in a doctoral course. Being different from a Latino migrant, Carlos in London who was a lecturer at a university in Colombia (Block 2006), Ken needs not be declassed like Carlos and smoothly adjusted to the new community of practice, as it was similar to his previous environment in Japan.

I attended weekly seminar, called Wednesday Seminar. Every week, different guest speaker came to IOE and gave a presentation. Thanks to having background knowledge, I could understand what the speaker said although any resumes were not distributed. After the seminar, I always attended pub sessions. The conversation with colleagues include difficult abstract topics of philosophy, I enjoyed talking with them. Other international students and native students warmly seemed to welcome me to join the community because I had already read German Philosopher's Kant's and Heidegger's books in German while most of students in the seminar did not read them in German.

I discussed the concept of death in Heidegger's theory with a Korean student and British student. It was really exciting experience for me because she wrote master thesis about death education from Heidegger's perspective. …

Wednesday seminar allowed his speaking and listening skill in English to drastically improve and he could absorb and share various knowledge about recent studies of philosophy from different perspectives of other overseas students and British students. Through this mutual engagement, Ken's identity as an active student, rather than a passive student had been reproduced. Analysed from the perspective of language learning strategy (Dornyei, 2005), he unconsciously used 'social strategy' (to share information with other language learners, international students) while other Japanese Ph.D students did not participate in pub sessions after the Wednesday Seminar because they were unwilling to communicate with unfamiliar students(many part-time Ph.D students and people who are interested in philosophy can attend the seminar)

6.2　Positioning

It is important for language learners to be regarded as adequate interlocutors by target language speakers. Some previous research (Bremer, *et al* 1996; Norton, 2000) in second language learning about migrants shows that when the native speakers position adult migrants as inadequate interlocutors, the opportunity to interact with them tends to be lost. In contrast, Ken was a visiting student and had the right to talk with his supervisor as a student in the seminar. In addition, he noticed that his supervisor positions him as an expert of Kant not as one of students who have low English proficiency, which contributed to make him become confident in showing his idea in English.

Before the tutorial, I wondered if I could manage an hour to talk with my tutor, I mean, I didn't want him to be disappointed with my speech, my speaking skill. So, I prepared a lot to show my opinion in English.… But, he told me I didn't need to write something at all after the first tutorial. He said, if I explained my new perspective for my thesis every tutorial, he would give me feedback. When I heard his words, I was so relieved because he totally understood what I think and what I try to write for my doctor thesis.

Actually, he seemed to admire me because my topic is quite original one among colleagues. My theme is the relationship between Kant and Geography. Few researchers who can read German have researched it … ..And, he suggested to me I submit my article to the Academic Society which he was a one of committee.

At first, in the tutorial, Ken self-consciously positioned himself as one of a visiting Ph.D. students and an international student who has concern about his English speaking and writing skills. Therefore, before the weekly tutorial, he wrote in detail about what he was going to research and which part of Kant's theory most deeply interested him, and he tried to ask his tutor to give him useful advices. He worried about his communicative competence and had anxiety about how to speak in the tutorial. He also wondered if the tutor was satisfied with the content of his speech. However, as Ken found that his supervisor appeared to respect him in terms of his research, his identity as one of the Ph. D student who did not have confidence to speak English was drastically altered because of his supervisors' attitude towards him.

> In fact, my tutor is a really nice person and gentle. I can share various knowledge about philosophy with him…. Comparing to it (pre-sessional course), I really enjoyed the tutorial because I could talk about my interesting topic every week even though I had to prepare reading a lot. He also seemed to enjoy it. The topic was wide range from the role of civic education in UK to the importance of language in academia. He has researched Wittgenstein for many years so he always emphasized the importance of language for human being. He often taught me the origin of each English word when I misused some words during discussion and in my essay but his tone was so kind and in polite way. The tutorial sometimes continued more than one and a half hour and he sometimes forgot next student's appointment, so he had to wait his turn outside the professor's room.

Of course, Ken sometimes made mistakes within grammar and vocabulary. The tutor corrected his mistakes in humble and polite way and taught him how to express his ideas precisely in academic English writing. The tutor regarded him as not merely one of visitor students but a researcher who has plentiful knowledge about Kant with good English and German language skills and promised him to hold weekly tutorials while most home country students are only given the opportunity to meet their tutor once a month. Therefore, he repositioned himself as an active student and researcher who had own vision and opinions towards his study and various pedagogical issues. Thus, Ken did not need to feel inferiority like adult migrants and the gatekeeper, his supervisor's attitudes towards him encouraged him to provide plentiful output in English during the tutorials. As a result, he could have sufficient amount to time to contact speakers of the target language, which would be one factor in making him a good language learner.

6.3 Religious Identity

Ken is Christian and he tried to become involved in various religious social activities in the UK.

Joseph (2004 p.172) points out that:

> Religious identities concern where we come from and where we are going-our entire existence, not just the moment to moment. It is these identities above all that, for most people, give profound *meaning* to the 'names' we identify ourselves by, both as individuals and as groups.

Due to his religious identity, it is more familiar for him to experience the Christian culture of the target language compared to other Japanese students. Approximately only one percent of Japanese people are Christian. His religious identity also seemed to promote not only his language learning but also understanding of Kant's theory as a researcher. Furthermore, on account of Christianity he could feel concord with some speakers of the target language.

> In UK there are so many churches. Visiting National Gallery, I was so moved by many living in UK made me aware of what is my religion. Actually, some of my friends in pre-sessional course are Islamic and they often asked me about my religion although, you know, nobody asked me the same questions in Japan. Also, to understand Kant's philosophy, it goes without saying that Christianity is one of important element. On Christmas day I went to Christmas carol concert which was held in Royal Albert Hall and sang some Christmas carols with other British people. It was really, really fantastic and amazing experience because I could celebrate Jesus birthday with other British people and feel unity with them because of having the same religion. …. Sometimes I participated in study group of Bible in other small church and talked about own faith and sin. Even though I am Japanese, they warmly invited me to the group and we could confess mental suffering and pray to God with them.

Ken's identity was affected by his religious identity during his childhood. While studying in the UK, his religious identity had been strengthen through different experiences, such as by seeing some other religious colleagues in his pre-sessional course, and the great number of churches in the UK. According to Kiang (2004), international students tend to feel isolated and some of them drop out of their schools. However, his religious identity encouraged him to participate in a Christmas carol concert and a Bible study group and he could feel solidarity with native speakers in an 'imagined' community of religious peace and concord and this helped him to keep calm mentally in spite of facing culture shock and language shock. His acts arisen from his religious identity seemed to play the role of 'affective strategies' (Dornyei, 2005).

Thanks to his background, as Christian he could also have religious tolerance for his host family who

are strictly Jewish. Whereas most Japanese students live in IOE's accommodation, he chose to stay in a British family's house to improve his English speaking skill.

> Few Japanese students chose to live with British but, I found a web page about home stay and then started to live with the host family. …. So after dinner, he told me about Jewish and he explained the history of Jewish which is longer than Christianity and he tries to encourage his son to learn English and Hebrew even if he is just two years old. It is a nice experience for me because he often spoke to me ….
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> In my university, I tend to speak with Asian international students whose pronunciation and vocabulary are not perfect but in my accommodation I can talk with native speakers even though they didn't allow me to cook bacons in their kitchen because of their belief, haha. At first I was so shocked to know that my bacons in fridge were dumped into a dust bin but it's OK. It's my fault. I totally forgot bacon is made of pork.

He could have opportunity to enhance his communicative proficiency even in his accommodation. He maintained good relationship with his host family because he respected the host family's religion. Besides the tutorials and Wednesday seminars, he could obtain further 'social resources' on account of sharing religious identity, although he had to put up with inconvenient rules there like not putting bacons, prawn and crabs in their kitchen.

6.4 Cultural Identity

Nunan & Choi (2010, p. 2) say that 'whether we are monolinguals or multilinguals, experts or novices, we all come across and struggle with issues of how language and culture affect or influence our identity.' However, Ken's cultural identity was not so inspired by education and day to day activities in Japan. He grew up in Hiroshima from childhood to eighteen years old in the place where American airplanes dropped atomic bombs during World War Ⅱ. Educational institution in Hiroshima seem to try to encourage students to look back past tragedy and not to stimulate nationalism and ethnocentrism. Therefore, it appeared to make students not concentrate on learning only their own culture which can lead to ethnocentrism. In contrast, he felt a kind of *akogare* towards Western culture (eager desire for experiencing Western culture) like other Japanese female students studying in Hawaii and were the subject of Piller & Takahashi's research(2006). He really favours western culture because he had experienced it in Austria.

> I spent 5 years in Kyoto which is so famous city for foreign tourists. Every day I pass by old temples

and shrines by bike to go to my university. It was my daily life not unusual thing, so I preferred European culture than Japanese because actually European arts and architectures are so gorgeous and fascinating. …. Maybe, my enjoyable memory in Austria also had an effect on my attitude towards European culture, but after moving to UK, I was so surprised to see that in Liberty, a department store, some British people was gazing at Japanese drawing which was drawn by just Black India ink. They seemed to think of whether they should buy the picture even though it was so expensive and not so good quality from my point of view… but I didn't know that present British people are also interested in Japanese drawings and culture. Actually, my supervisor tried to learn Japanese from me in tutorials and during having dinner with him and he' s also interested in Japanese ukiyoe and old temples.… Also, he admires Japanese personality, diligent, kind and polite. He was moved by the fact that when a big earthquake occurred in Tohoku area last year, nobody plundered food and water from other people.

For the first time, Ken relativized his own culture in the UK and he realized how Japanese culture and mentality are respected in the UK. He reconstructed his cultural identity due to British people' positive attitude towards Japan and then he started to introduce Japanese food and culture to his host family and colleagues.

I hesitated to emphasize that I am Japanese before knowing British people's interests towards Japan, but after that I sometimes baked Okonomiyaki (Japanese pancakes) and cooked Nikujaga (Japanese beef stew) for host family, my supervisor and my friends. Whenever I prepared Japanese dishes, they asked me about Japanese economic situation and customs. We talked a lot for long hours.

Compared to American students in the research of Isabelli- Garcia (2006), Ken was receptive to the culture of the target language, positioning it as superior to Japan. However, as he became aware of the status of Japan in the UK, he positively came to talk about Japan. Whereas Norton (2001) pointed out that adult migrants tend to have difficulty in having 'social recourses' in the host country, in the case of Ken the popularity of Japanese culture among British and other international students contributed to restructuring his cultural identity and giving him an opportunity to increase the amount of time he has to communicate with native speakers.

7. Conclusion

In the above essay, I have attempted to show the relationship between identity and a good language learner by using the data of a Japanese male Ph.D. student who can be considered an active student. I found three prominent features on his identity construction from his life story before studying abroad. Firstly, he was brought up in middle class family and obviously affected by his father, a professor at a university accumulating sufficient cultural capitals. Secondly, in Japan he did not have strong cultural identity towards Japan and held *akogare*, a favourable attitude towards European culture, which originated from his previous experiences in Austria during his childhood. He had *akogare,* like other female subjects of the previous studies. However, the reason why he had *akogare* seems to be different from the reason of the Japanese female subjects in the former research. For instance, the female Japanese subjects, Kyoko, Haesun and Kimi described that they felt frustration about the social structure in related to the power of women in Japanese working environment (Block, 2007). They held *akogare* as they regarded Japanese culture as sexiest, ageist and judgemental. They positioned them as a liberated gendered subject after studying abroad (Block, 2007).

Ken had never mentioned the sexual discrimination in Japanese n society in this interview. The Japanese female subjects appeared to have *akogare* and have motivation to study English to be free from the discriminative society in relation to gender issue.

Thirdly, he started to formulate his identity as a researcher of Kant in Japan and his intrinsic motivation to research his topic more deeply and to be admitted by academic gate keeper of Anglophone countries and learn English to enter inner circles of the international academic world from a peripheral country encouraged him to improve his target language proficiency. I analysed the reconstruction of his identity in the UK from two post-structualist's views, community of practice and positioning. I also examined his religious identity and cultural identity. At his university he attended the tutorials and seminars as one of visitor Ph.D. students. His supervisor and colleagues positioned him as an adequate interlocutor for their community on account of his having an original theme for doctoral thesis and the same existing knowledge about philosophy and education at them. As a result of this, he obviously identified himself as just a visiting student who has poor language proficiency but as an active researcher. Furthermore, since he unconsciously noticed the necessity of 'social resources' because of previously having had an enjoyable life with speakers of the target language in Austria, he positively tried to interact with a British family in his accommodation, shared his religious identity and communicated with other international students and his supervisor even outside classroom, cooking his home countries' dishes for them.

Thus, in identity related to gender, religious identity and cultural identity his background was different from the female subjects in the former research. While the previous studies focused on the issue of

gender, in his case his identity as an active researcher encouraged him to promote his language learning, which made him a good language learner.

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