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Investigating multilingual identity in study abroad contexts: A short story analysis approach

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 September 2017

Accepted 13 September 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Short story analysis

Study abroad

Multilingual identity

Narrative

ABSTRACT

This article examines the construct of second language identity and its susceptibility to change during study abroad experiences. The researcher draws on findings from a large-scale narrative-based study of Hong Kong students participating in study abroad programmes of varying lengths. In the study three dimensions of second language identity were found: (a) identity-related aspects of second language proficiency, (b) linguistic self-concept, and (c) second language-mediated aspects of personal development. This article explores these dimensions further in the life of one of the study abroad students over time. Interviews were conducted before and after his first year of study as an undergraduate student at a university in New Zealand, and then nearly five years later after his return to Hong Kong. The article demonstrates a short story approach to analysing the narrative interview data. Two short stories from the interviews, representing the 3 s language identity dimensions in study abroad contexts, are analysed for both their content and the varying scales of context in which the short stories were constructed and interpreted.

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1. Introduction

Short story analysis is an approach to analysing narrative data, such as stories told in interviews, that examines in detail the *content* of what storytellers say (what the stories are about) as well as the varying scales of *context* in which the narrator's storied experiences are lived or imagined. I have used short story analysis to explore language teacher and language tutor identities (Barkhuizen, 2016, 2017), and in this article, I aim to show that short story analysis can also be usefully applied to the investigation of the experiences of those who participate in study abroad (SA). In particular, I focus on the developing multilingual identity of a university student from Hong Kong who spent three years in New Zealand studying towards a BA degree.

Max (a pseudonym) was a participant in a larger study that investigated the second language (L2) identity development of Hong Kong students in SA contexts (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown, 2013). Unlike some studies which view identity as an individual difference variable affecting language proficiency as an outcome of SA (e.g., Kinginger, 2008; Polanyi, 1995), the study in which Max was a participant conceptualised identity as an important outcome of SA, especially in contexts where SA involves the learning and use of a second language:

Study abroad is typically an experience in which embodied identities are relocated and reflexive/imagined identities are challenged by the need to achieve recognition for identities in an unfamiliar cultural setting. This challenge to

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.09.014>

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Please cite this article in press as: Barkhuizen, G., Investigating multilingual identity in study abroad contexts: A short story analysis approach, System (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.09.014>

identity may be characteristic of all study abroad experiences, but when study abroad involves a second language, it is heightened by the need to do identity work in the second language, which poses particular challenges to students' second language identities. (Benson et al., 2013, p. 39, p. 39)

To explore L2 identity as an outcome of SA, the researchers conducted pre- and post-sojourn interviews with 48 participants (Benson et al., 2013). Through a process of narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), the pairs of interviews were written up as a 2000-word narrative of each participant's SA experiences, focusing particularly on their L2 identity development. A thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) was then conducted on the narratives, and cross-case comparisons were then made. Through this process Benson et al. developed a model of potential L2 identity outcomes. The model consists of three interrelated dimensions of L2 identity development that lie along a continuum with L2 proficiency towards one end and personal competence towards the other: (a) identity-related aspects of *second language proficiency*, (b) *linguistic self-concept*, and (c) second language-mediated aspects of *personal development*. In this article, I explore these dimensions further. My purpose in doing so is twofold: to illustrate the procedures of short story analysis and to argue for its value as a legitimate means of examining in depth the identity development of SA participants over time. At the same time, the article provides glimpses into the story of Max's SA experience and related identity changes both during and post-sojourn.

Jackson (2016a) points out that most of the SA research on L2 and intercultural learning focuses on students who take language courses in the host country and participate in scheduled cultural activities. She adds that “far fewer studies explore the L2 use and development of non-language specialists in L2 contexts, especially those with an advanced level of proficiency” (p. 5). Max fits such a profile – his primary SA goal was to obtain his BA degree at a university in New Zealand, where, like the vast-majority of participants from the Asia-Pacific region, he would “do coursework in a second language (L2), with English the most common medium-of-instruction” (Jackson, 2016a, p. 4). In attempting to understand Max's identity development over time during and after SA, therefore, it is important to bear in mind both his goals for SA and the educational conditions of the SA institutional setting in which he worked to achieve these goals.

In the next section, I briefly outline recent ideas about the relationship between identity and SA and describe in more detail Benson et al.'s (2013) model of L2 identity development in SA contexts. After introducing Max and describing data-collection procedures, I explain the processes involved in short story analysis. Two short stories are then analysed using short story analysis. The article concludes with implications for further research on multilingual identity in SA.

2. Multilingual identity and study abroad

Kinginger's (2015) review of recent studies on identity in academic SA reveals that they “clearly demonstrate that student sojourners abroad may encounter challenges not only to their language skills, but also to their identities” (p. 6). Kinginger classifies the studies into five identity categories: nationality, foreigner identities, gender, age, and sexuality. In an earlier review (Kinginger, 2013) she also included studies that investigated linguistic identity and ethno-racialized identities. Kinginger concludes that since academic sojourns are temporary and usually involve personal choice regarding the level of engagement with host communities and languages, identity challenges and changes may not always be significant. However, she concedes that “it may be true that more modest changes occur and that students are offered glimpses of identity-related possibilities through exposure to the practices of their hosts” (2013, p. 343). Block's (2007) review covers identity or subject positions in SA in relation to sexual harassment, gender, teacher-student relationships, and national identity, and also points to potential identity changes as an outcome of SA.

Jackson's (2008) study of Hong Kong SA students who took part in a five-week sojourn in England investigates in ethnographic detail the challenges and changes to their identities. Informed by poststructuralist theories of identity, Jackson presents four well-crafted case studies to describe her participants' intercultural adjustments, some more easily negotiated than others, as the participants became aware of their own identities in relation to the SA context – their “new worlds” (p. 12) – which they mediated through their L2 (English). Jackson's study suggests that agency, willingness to engage with the host community, and openness to identity (re)construction play a significant role in achieving the desired benefits of SA participation, and so cautions that relying on exposure to the SA context alone will not result in desired outcomes. Furthermore, she argues for interventions in the form of pre-, during, and post-sojourn courses and workshops during which participants get to reflect further on their experiences abroad (see also Jackson, 2017).

Like Jackson's research, the study by Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2010) also emphasizes the agency and resilience of SA participants as being central to their achievement and success. Their mixed-methods study investigated the experiences of first-year international students during their undergraduate years at universities in the United Kingdom. The findings reveal complex and shifting associations between language proficiency, social interaction, personal development and academic outcomes, and that, in sum, “intercultural learning experiences are both transitional and transformational and necessitate identity change to a greater or lesser extent” (p. 20). Reaching similar conclusions from a far more critical perspective, Kubota (2016) examines identity as a “social imaginary”, or a way of thinking about self and others that is shared by a community. From this perspective Kubota critiques the commonly held assumptions in SA programmes and research regarding the claimed benefits for sojourners, specifically student mobility in higher education. She includes four broad identity-related categories: developing language skills, fostering cultural understanding and intercultural competence, enhancing personal growth, and increasing career opportunities.

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