How teaching styles affect the motivation of students returning from short-term experiences abroad

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Introduction

Many language teachers seem to believe that simply having their students participate in a study abroad (SA) program will result in a dramatic increase in their linguistic self-confidence and motivation to learn the language of the country that they visit. Of course, there are numerous advantages of going to a foreign country. Those who travel abroad are exposed to the foreign country’s culture and language in a way that cannot be experienced in regular language classes or even in immersion programs. There would be few that disagree that with the increasing awareness of the importance of being an internationally minded person in modern society, the realization of being a member of the global community is essential for young students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). However, even though the importance of studying abroad is undeniable, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced that in recent years the number of Japanese students studying abroad has in fact been decreasing (2013). The number of Japanese citizens studying overseas peaked at 82,945 in 2004 and steadily decreased to 58,060 in 2010. The number of schools, both private and public, who take their students abroad on their school trip, commonly known as the shuugakuryokou in Japanese, however, has gradually increased since 2004 to 827 high schools and 110 junior high schools in 2011 (Educational Tour Institute, 2012). Obviously, the shorter format of the experience abroad is more financially viable for more many families. However, there remain questions of whether these short-term SA experiences are in fact beneficial for students, and what teachers can do to make these trips more meaningful for their students. The present paper purports to address these issues, discussing the findings of previous research, and summarizing the results of teachers’ actions in the classroom after students returned from abroad and how these affected the students’ study habits.
Literature Review

Study abroad (SA) experiences and the benefits for participants have been researched in many different fields of second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., Freed, 1990; Sasaki, 2011; Leis, 2013, 2014). In an early study of the effects of a SA program, Freed (1990) suggested that, based on the results of 40 university students participating in a six-week SA in France, there were no significant increases in students’ learning motivation. Freed’s study concluded that a longer experience would be more beneficial for students’ motivation and communication skills.

Sasaki (2011) reported how students’ writing ability and motivation to write changed due to an experience studying abroad. According to Sasaki’s research, although a SA program does indeed have a positive influence, it appears that the length of the experience abroad is a vital factor to consider. A significant improvement in writing ability was only seen in subjects who stayed abroad for more than four months. Likewise, an increase in the subjects’ intrinsic motivation in L2 (second language) writing was only seen after eight months abroad. Sasaki suggests that the subjects’ ability to create imagined L2 communities due to their experience abroad had a strong influence on their motivation to write in a foreign language.

There have been several studies (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, M & Papi, 2009; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2011; Leis, Ando & Suzuki, 2011; Leis, 2012) based on the effects students creating an imagined L2 community may have on the strength of their motivation. This imagined L2 community refers to the suggestion by Dörnyei (2005) that students will be more highly motivated to study an L2 when they are able to imagine themselves communicating in that L2 successfully with members of an imagined community they have created in their mind.

In their study of 741 secondary school Iranian students, Papi and Abdollahzadeh (2011) suggest that the motivational practice of teachers has a strong relationship to the motivational behavior of their students. As is also suggested by Dörnyei (2008), Papi and Abdollahzadeh conclude that simply having an image of oneself communicating in an L2 with members of the imagined L2 community is not sufficient to strengthen the motivational behavior of students.

The results of Leis’s (2012) research of the relationship between the motivation and metacognitive skills (MS) in 320 Japanese high school students support this claim, suggesting that although students who had low motivation did not seem to use
metacognitive strategies in their L2 study, students with high motivation and salient imagined L2 communities did not necessarily use metacognitive skills. Therefore, it is necessary to find various methods to strengthen the relationship between students’ motivation and the behavior they undertake to improve their L2 ability. Traveling abroad for educational purposes may be one of these methods.

Two previous researches conducted by this author studying how traveling abroad affected participants’ L2 Self produced contrasting outcomes. The results of Leis’s (2013) research showed that when students returned from a short-term SA program, their motivation increased slightly, but increased significantly two months later, with the participants showed signs of becoming autonomous in their studies. On the other hand, in a more recent study, although similar results were seen immediately after returning from abroad, the figures returned to their initial level two months later (Leis, 2014). There is, therefore, a need to study what occurs in the two months after returning from abroad that encourages further trends amongst students towards becoming autonomous in their studies.

This Study

The present study aims to compare two school trips abroad and whether the actions of teachers affect the motivation and metacognitive skills (i.e., autonomy) of students upon returning to Japan. To keep in line with previous studies, I focus on motivation from the L2 Self perspective, with the added factor of metacognitive skills to gain an understanding of existent or non-existent trends toward or away from being autonomous as a result of participating in a SA program, and the teaching focuses of instructors upon returning to Japan.

Subjects

Two groups of subjects participated in this study. The first group (hereafter JHS Group) consisted of ten third-year junior high school students with an average age of 14.80. At the time of traveling abroad, the students had had two and a half years of formal English education and perceived their own English proficiency at 2.1 on a scale from one (i.e., beginning) to five (i.e., advanced). The students traveled to the United States for ten days as part of the curriculum of the English Course to which they belonged. In interviews with teachers, it was learned that upon returning to Japan, the
teachers of the JHS Group included aspects of the students’ study abroad program in their regular English classes and mid-term and end-of-term tests.

The second group (hereafter SHS Group) consisted of 13 second-year senior high school students with an average age of 16.58. The students had had four and a half years of formal English education, and perceived their English ability to be 3.17 on the same scale as that used by the JHS Group. As members of the English Course at their school, the SHS Group were required to travel to Australia for twelve days for their school trip. In interviews with teachers, it was learned that when the students returned to Japan, their English teachers did not include any aspect of their study abroad program in either their English lessons or their examinations. Instead, teachers began to focus their classes and assessment on preparing for university entrance examinations, concentrating on increasing students’ understanding of English grammar and vocabulary.

**Method**

In order to measure the level of students’ motivation, a L2 Self questionnaire created by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) was used. This questionnaire has been used in previous studies by the author (e.g., Leis et al., 2011; Leis, 2012) and has proved to be a reliable tool for measuring motivation. In addition, ten items related to metacognitive skills created by the author (see Leis, 2012, 2013, 2014) were included to give a clear understanding of changes in students’ autonomy due to traveling abroad and the actions of teachers upon returning to Japan.

The questionnaire was conducted three times: once immediately before traveling abroad (i.e., First Time), once immediately after returning from abroad (i.e., Second Time), and once two months after returning from abroad (i.e., Third Time). These times were decided with the goal of gaining an understanding of both the immediate effects of traveling abroad on participants’ autonomy and the how teaching styles affected the level of students’ autonomy in their English learning after returning to Japan.

**Results and Discussion**

The goal of the present paper is not to compare the level of motivation between the JHS and SHS Groups, but to investigate patterns within each group as a result of traveling abroad and English classes thereafter, and then compare these differences
between the two groups. The author, therefore, will begin by reporting changes in motivation and metacognitive skills. This will be followed by a discussion of changes in the correlations of motivation and metacognition, which the author previously proposed to be an indication of students’ autonomy (Leis, 2012).

Table 1 shows a summary of the changes in motivation and metacognitive skills of participating students from the JHS Group and SHS Group. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) failed to show any statistically significant differences in the variables measuring motivation and metacognitive over the course of this study. This shows a similar trend to previous studies (Freed, 1990; Sasaki, 2011; Leis, 2013), suggesting that study trips abroad of less than two months are not effective in directly achieving a salient increase in the L2 learning motivation of the participants. Although no statistically significant increases were seen, a similar pattern to that in Leis (2013) can be observed in the JHS Group. That is, the levels of motivation and metacognitive skills continued to rise in the two months after returning to Japan. The level of the JHS group’s Ought-to L2 Self, however, decreased, suggesting a lowering feeling of responsibility to learn English.

Table 1.

Changes in motivation and metacognitive skills in the present study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>JHS Group</th>
<th>SHS Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>IL2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. EM: Motivation to study English; IL2: Ideal L2 Self; OTL2: Ought-to L2 Self; MS: Metacognitive Skills; Max: 6; Min: 1.

Table 2 reports on changes in the correlations of motivation and metacognitive skills. An increased correlation between motivation and metacognitive skills suggests higher autonomous behavior in the subjects. Table 2 suggests that the JHS Group showed a trend towards becoming more autonomous in their studies, whereas the SHS Group displayed an opposite curve, with correlations dropping dramatically in the Ideal
L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self variables. The JHS group showed a similar pattern to that of the Leis’s (2013) study, in which students tended to become more autonomous in their learning after returning from abroad when teachers included their experience abroad in regular classes and term tests. The teachers of the SHS Group, however, did not do so, and therefore, a drop can be seen in the autonomous behavior of students.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JHS Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>SHS Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>IL2</td>
<td>OTL2</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>IL2</td>
<td>OTL2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>.818**</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.740**</td>
<td>.677**</td>
<td>.625*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>.389</td>
<td>.874**</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.750**</td>
<td>.649**</td>
<td>.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>.471</td>
<td>.724*</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>.627*</td>
<td>.490*</td>
<td>.374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); EM: Motivation to study English; IL2: Ideal L2 Self; OTL2: Ought-to L2 Self.

Conclusion

The results of the present research make it clear that the effects of participating in a SA program may not be salient immediately upon returning home, instead taking several weeks to appear. Furthermore, the actions of teachers in the language classroom seems to detrimental in deciding whether that SA program was successful in encouraging participants to be autonomous in their studies. It is imperative that language teachers attempt to include some aspects of the SA program in their regular lessons, as well as tests, in order to remind the students of not only cultural experiences they may have had, but also language and communication skills they would have picked up. When instructors are able to do this, I strongly believe that a SA program, regardless of its length, can be beneficial for the motivation of the participants.

Acknowledgements

This paper was supported in part by Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists B (N.o. 25770200). Much gratitude goes to Mineyoshi Aoyama for his support throughout this
study. The author would like to thank the teachers and students who cooperated in this research project. Also, appreciation goes to Zoltan Dörnyei for granting permission to use his questionnaire.

**Note**

1. In Leis (2012), I described an autonomous student as one who goes beyond being motivated, and uses metacognitive skills to reflect on his or her on study habits to improve the way he or she learns.

**References**


