



Book Review

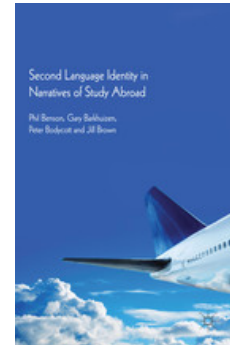
Second Language Identity in Narratives of Study Abroad

by Phil Benson, Gary Barkhuizen, Peter Bodycott, & Jill Brown

London: Palgrave Macmillan (2013)

ISBN-13 (Hardback) 9781137029430 (PDF EBook) 9781137029423

(Paperback) 9781137029416 (EPUB EBook 9781137029430)



This book weaves together three ideas: second language identity, narrative, and study abroad. It provides case study narratives of one graduate, seven undergraduate, and two secondary students from Hong Kong studying overseas for periods ranging from ten days to two years. Unfortunately, it lacks “thick descriptions” of when the informants made their statements, who they were communicating with, how the data was coded, or even how the informants were selected. As such, I feel it is of limited value in terms of research methodology. However, this text does provide a useful overview of some of the theoretical ideas that are currently used to explain how (and why) many persons studying abroad change in terms of the ways they see themselves and the world around them. Let me briefly examine some of its core concepts, then evaluate the text overall.

Second Language Identity

This text embraces a post-structuralist view of identity. Adopting notions from Harré’s (2001) model of “three selves” as well as ideas from Markus and Nurius (1986), the authors propose a six-faceted model of identity. This model certainly has heuristic value, though it seems problematic in some respects. For example, a category of “imagined past” (often in the form of a narrative) is missing. To me it seems that a person’s “imagined past” is at least as important as their “imagined future.”

Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown describe second language identity as, “any aspect of a person’s identity that is related to their knowledge and use of a second language” (p. 17) and acknowledge it as a “complex, multidimensional construct . . . [that] varies according to context” (p. 2). They emphasize the organic, evolving nature of second language identity and how critical experiences (both positive and negative) can shift axes of identity. Asserting that self-concepts are linguistically structured, the authors also claim that, “second language learning necessarily impinges on the learner’s identity” (p. 29). Moreover, they encourage us to consider language not merely as a code, but also a ‘meaning-making system’ (Kramsch, 2009, p. 2). For this reason they affirm that using different languages also invariably involves enacting new identities - or at the very least modifying existing ones.

Narratives

The authors portray narratives as a sort of ‘glue’ that holds various fragmented aspects of our identities together. Narratives are, in their view, “a means of organising pieces of information that would otherwise lack coherence into meaningful sequences of events” (p. 24). Citing Bruner (2001, p. 34), they remind us that narratives are not merely individual or private affairs: there is a complex interplay between a person’s self-adopted scripts and how others react to their stories.

For those learning a foreign language, it is argued that narratives play a decisive role in determining how learners interface with a target language and in their learning outcomes. The authors assert that each language learner carries a “story” about their previous learning experiences that plays a

significant role in shaping their future learning expectations and outcomes. Hence, educators should attempt to help learners become more aware of their personal narratives, recognize how they are both similar and different from the narratives of others, and finally help learners “reinterpret” or modify their given narratives in ways that enable learners to more readily achieve their desired outcomes.

Study Abroad

The ten narratives in this text present a broad range of study abroad experiences. The authors highlight how various study abroad components such as program length, degree of interaction with the host community, and academic content shape study abroad outcomes. At the same time, they underscore that “individual [personality] differences may lead to very different outcomes for students who participate in the same [study abroad] programme” (p. 4). In other words, study abroad involves multi-faceted variables, making the results difficult to predict with certainty.

One thing I particularly like about this book is how it emphasizes the need for well-grounded pre-departure and post-return orientation to orient students to life overseas and, upon returning, help them critically evaluate their experiences. At the end of this text the core features of an effective study abroad programme are aptly summarized:

An effective study abroad program identifies, explores, builds, and supports second language identity understanding and development. It is one that encourages and supports intercultural development at all levels, and provides opportunities to practice and develop autonomy and decision-making. It elicits and revisits the programme and personal purposes and goals of study abroad. It provides individual students with the personal, social, and linguistic and academic support they need before, during and on return from their study abroad experience. (p. 161)

Some Pros and Cons

In my view, this book has three just limitations. The first concerns its underlying design structure. The data for this study came from (1) a one hour pre-departure interview with each informant in Cantonese and/or English by a research assistant, (2) periodic digital contact by that assistant while the participants were abroad, and (3) a one hour interview shortly after their return. As such, no information about the long-term effects of study abroad is outlined in this study. Moreover, the method of communicating with informants by various digital channels in Step (2) might lead to different projected identities: some individuals might project “virtual selves” on their public Facebook pages that are quite different from their private emails.

Sampling is another limitation to consider. Nine of the ten informants were female. If we regard study abroad as a “gendered experience” (Coleman, 2013, p. 34), then this text can offer only limited insights into how male participants might regard that experience. Moreover, with the exception of one informant who was forced to study abroad because of a program requirement, all informants in this study were highly motivated to *study* overseas. As such, this text does not shed light on how less proficient English users (or those going abroad for mainly touristic motives) tend to regard their overseas experiences.

Finally, the narrative approach in this volume - derived from the insights of Polkinghorne (1995) and Josselson (2006) - is something I was not entirely comfortable with. I should acknowledge a theoretical bias in favor of more grounded, mixed method, or quantitative research. In my view, this 188-page text does not provide enough information about *who* is constructing the narratives and *what* information is being used from *which* specific contexts. In other words, the implicit data is not so clearly linked to the explicit narratives. Had the authors adopted a *critical participatory looping* procedure recommended by Murphey and Falout (2010), I would feel more assured about the overall

integrity of its narratives. However, this important step appears to be missing from the research. Although the stories claim to be emic accounts, the way that they were constructed has a distinctly etic flavor.

By contrast, two things about this text seem particularly exemplary. First, I very much like the way that exploratory questions precede the narratives. Those questions prime readers to focus on certain discourse threads and help them scaffold the material appearing later. Second, the advice about study abroad programs in Chapter 9 has a handy practical focus. Program administrators who are pressed for time might find that chapter most valuable.

The Bottom Line

It is tempting to compare this text with Jackson's 2008 text reviewed in this issue of *Ryūgaku*. Both volumes focus on students from Hong Kong and employ narrative analyses. However, Jackson is more explicit about the methodological procedures informing her research. One advantage of this text is that it provides a more up-to-date overview of the literature on study abroad, identity, and language learning. If readers are mainly interested in theoretical perspectives, however, other texts such as Block (2007) or many articles featured in the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* also offer excellent lucid descriptions.

Overall, my recommendation for this text is rather lukewarm. It is probably of particular value to study abroad administrators in Hong Kong and/or those with a keen interest in narrative theory and/or identity theory. For those in Japan or who have somewhat varied interests, a brief skim through this text should probably suffice.

- Reviewed by Tim Newfields

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