Re-constructing identities of Japanese college students: A dynamic shift after their overseas experience

Ayako Namba
Okayama University, Japan

Although theories related to ‘social identity’ have mainly been developed in the area of psychology, notable work covering sociolinguistic aspects includes research done by Gumperz (1982). His research on identity-based analysis of conversation revealed that speakers need to achieve ‘communicative flexibility’ in cross-cultural settings. When looking at this as a longitudinal process with shifting time and space, it is worthwhile to underpin the roles of a speaker’s attitude, communicative behavior and conversation style to understand how they are affected towards the achievement of the communicative flexibility. In addition, there have been relatively few studies which investigate Japanese people’s ways of re-constructing their identities in different times and spaces.

This ongoing study aims to explore how Japanese college students re-construct their identities through their overseas experiences focusing on two stages: before and after those experiences. The study will demonstrate how they change their awareness towards different cultures, and the relationship between the self and the other through such experiences by examining their attitude, (non-)linguistic behavior and conversation style through interviews with them.

The data collected are twofold: 1090 minutes of interviews audio-recorded at a Japanese university. Participants were four Japanese college students who studied overseas as exchange students for 6 9 months. I interviewed each of them before (first stage) and after (second stage) studying abroad.

My analysis focuses on if there is any shift in the students’ awareness of their inter-cultural perspectives, and the self and the other from the first stage to the second. I will show that they were unexpectedly and gradually more aware of the distinctiveness of their own Japanese culture and society at the second stage, and they displayed ‘communicative flexibility’ through broadened understandings towards different cultures in which they experienced, and different social interaction they experienced in the host country.

Keywords: Japanese communication, re-construction of identity, overseas experience.