The changing identities of Japanese high school students in short-term study abroad programs.

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Large numbers of Japanese students choose to study abroad every year, yet their experiences have received less attention than those of their Western peers (Kinginger, 2013). While there have been investigations of Japanese high school students in study abroad contexts such as Churchill (2006), current research remains limited (Tan & Kinginger, 2013). This paper adopts the identity approach outlined by Norton and McKinney (2011) in examining the experiences of seven Japanese high school students participating in short-term study abroad programs in England and the US during the summer of 2014, focusing on the following two questions:

• What consequences do short-term study abroad programs have for the cultural and second language identities of Japanese high school students?
• Are there differences in the experiences of Japanese high school students when compared to the experiences of their American and European counterparts?

Data were gathered from interviews both before and after the exchange, and from a diary study conducted while the respondents were on exchange. These data were then subjected to qualitative thematic analysis to identify the specific issues and circumstances that caused respondents to re-evaluate or reaffirm their cultural and linguistic identities—what Block (2007) terms “critical experiences.” Analysis of the data reveals that the students uncritically drew on discourses relating to the uniqueness of Japanese culture and the importance of understanding Western cultural and social systems when interpreting their experiences. The study also highlights the importance that the family unit plays in a student choosing to study abroad, reflecting group-based decision-making tendencies found in Japanese culture.

This paper addresses the conference topic 5 (“What are the cultural interests and concerns of language students moving from, to, and within Asia?”) by exploring the unique perspectives of Japanese respondents on study abroad and how the current social and cultural climate prizes experience in foreign contexts.
References


