Maintaining the Japan Connection: The Impact of Study Abroad on Japanese Language Learners’ Life Trajectories and Ongoing Interaction with Japanese Speakers

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Maintaining the Japan connection: The impact of study abroad on Japanese language learners’ life trajectories and ongoing interaction with Japanese speakers

Maintenir la connexion avec le Japon : L’impact des études à l’étranger sur les trajectoires de vie des apprenants de japonais et l’interaction continue avec des locuteurs japonais

Rikki Campbell, Monash University

Abstract
This article explores the post-study abroad life trajectories of learners of Japanese. Drawing upon data collected from eight interviewees, it presents the experiences of study abroad returnees’ ongoing engagement with Japan and Japanese speakers once they were removed from the study abroad environment. In particular, it focuses on the impact of study abroad on ongoing studies and career trajectory, and examines ongoing interaction with Japanese speakers throughout these key life stages. Through the lens of possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), this study also examines how the participants’ ongoing engagement with the target language is reflected in their post-study abroad L2 self-concepts. It was found that although the experience of studying abroad in Japan presented a critical incident in each of the participants’ future life trajectories, and each of them remain connected to Japan in various ways, their patterns of engagement with Japanese speakers after returning home differed significantly.

Résumé
Cet article explore les trajectoires de vie post-études à l’étranger des apprenants de japonais. Puisant des données recueillies auprès de huit personnes interrogées, il présente les expériences des participants de retour des études à l’étranger, concernant leur engagement continu avec le Japon et les locuteurs japonais, une fois qu’ils se sont éloignés de l’environnement des études à l’étranger. En particulier, il met l’accent sur l’impact des études à l’étranger sur les études en cours et la carrière professionnelle, et examine l’interaction continue avec les locuteurs japonais à des étapes-clés de la vie. À la lumière de la théorie des personnalités possibles (Markus & Nurius, 1986), cette étude examine également la manière dont l’engagement continu des participants avec la langue-cible est reflété dans leur image de soi d’apprenant de langue seconde (L2) après leurs études à l’étranger. Il a été constaté que, quoique l’expérience d’étudier à l’étranger, au Japon, ait représenté un incident critique dans les futures trajectoires de vie de chaque participant, et que chacun d’entre eux est resté connecté avec le Japon de diverses façons, leurs modes d’engagement avec des locuteurs japonais, après leur retour à la maison, varient significativement.

Keywords: Japanese learners; life trajectories; L2 self; post-study abroad, social interaction

Mots clés: apprenants de japonais ; trajectoires de vie ; le moi de l’apprenant de langue seconde (L2) ; post-étude à l’étranger ; interaction sociale

Introduction
For many students, study abroad represents a momentous, often life-changing event: an exciting and novel experience of a lifetime. For language learners in particular, it presents an important opportunity to be immersed in the target language (TL) and culture, and establish relationships with TL speakers. Although great strides have been made in recent years in researching second language (L2) study abroad participants’ language use and acquisition, social interaction, and relationships during the sojourn (see Kinginger, 2009; Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2015), there remains fertile ground for investigating how learners continue to engage with the TL and its speakers once they return home. Examination of post-study abroad experiences sheds
light not only on the significance of study abroad in learners’ ongoing life trajectories, but also on the understanding of L2 development/maintenance as an ongoing process.

**Literature review**

Over the last 25 years, an increasing body of research on study abroad outcomes assessment has emerged. The majority of these studies have examined the immediate and short-term impact of study abroad on various aspects of L2 acquisition, intercultural awareness, cultural, linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge gained, and personal growth (Franklin, 2010, p. 169). With regard to the latter, a number of qualitative studies have revealed changes in learner identity as a result of study abroad (e.g., Allen, Dristas, & Mills, 2007; Alred & Byram, 2002; Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2013; Jackson, 2008, 2010, 2013; Kinginger, 2008; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

Pellegrino Aveni (2005) examined the identities of American students who studied abroad in Russia for one or two semesters in terms of their ideal and actual self-concepts. Based upon her participants’ experiences, she concluded that study abroad “result[s] in a new sense of personality and purpose” that lasts long after students return home (p. 150). Focusing on Hong Kong students who studied abroad in England or Canada, studies conducted by Jackson (2008, 2010, 2013) have also highlighted how programs ranging from five weeks to one year in duration can result in important identity shifts. In particular, she found that her participants “incorporate[d] new elements into their evolving sense of self and enter[ed] the creative world of ‘third space’: an identity that was not exclusively anchored in one language/culture or the other (2008, p. 2). Furthermore, she revealed that study abroad could raise students’ awareness of their place in the world, increase their appreciation of their cultural and ethnic identities, and strengthen their affinity with the L2 and their willingness to use it. For example, Jackson’s (2013) case study indicated that a year-long program could result in internationally oriented career goals that had not been considered before the study abroad experience.

While the research reported above reveals a multitude of potential benefits of study abroad, Coleman (2013, p. 27) has pointed out that there are “far too few studies [that] have sought to explore the long-term impact of the always challenging and often life-changing experience.” Although limited in number, the studies that do exist provide crucial insight to the ongoing influence of study abroad in the years, if not decades, after program completion. For instance, longitudinal studies have found that study abroad can lead to a heightened interest in or attainment of further educational qualifications (McMillan & Opem, 2004; Nunan, 2006; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009), impact career directions (DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen, & Ditta, 2013; Dwyer, 2002; Forsey, Broomhall, & Davis, 2012; Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Paige et al., 2009), enhance participants’ international perspective (Dwyer, 2002; Forsey et al., 2012), and increase likelihood of working with other cultures professionally (Akande & Slawson, 2000; Hansel, 2008; Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004). With particular regard to L2 learners, it has also been found that the experience of studying abroad can reinforce commitment to foreign language study, promote ongoing L2 use, and deepen relations with native speakers (NSs) of the TL even decades after students return home (e.g. Alred & Byram, 2002; DeGraaf et al., 2013; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Kurata, 2004; McMillan & Opem, 2004; Mistretta, 2008; Nunan, 2006).

Of the few studies that have considered the relationship between study abroad experiences and ongoing interaction with the host country, its language, and its speakers, are the doctoral and master’s projects conducted by Jiménez Jiménez (2003) and Fridhandler (2006) respectively. Both of these studies examined the experiences of L2 learners of Spanish during study abroad and then within several months to two years after returning home. Focusing upon
L2 interaction, Jiménez Jiménez found that the degree of L2 use after studying abroad was significantly influenced by the type of plans participants made for the future, with those planning to utilize Spanish in future travel or work using more of the TL than those who had no such plans. Furthermore, participants whose L2 proficiency had not increased as much as they had hoped for by studying abroad reported self-conscious feelings of failure, which decreased their motivation to use the L2 once back home. In Fridhandler’s study, many of the participants maintained relationships with Spanish speakers met while abroad, and also established new social groups with Latin Americans once returning home to Canada. They also exhibited a deep, ongoing connection with the host country, observable in their future personal travel and career plans.

Finally, although not concerned with study abroad experiences per se, in that the participants did not “study” while abroad, research conducted by Alred and Byram (2002) and Coffey and Street (2008) also offers important insight. By interviewing 12 British adults ten years after they participated in a university year abroad as teaching assistants, Alred and Byram found that the sojourn functioned as a significant reference point through which the participants viewed their current experiences. In particular, participants maintained direct links between their year abroad and their roles as linguists and/or cultural mediators in their current professions. Through examining the life history accounts of two British adults aged 54 and 62, Coffey and Street also revealed that participants’ personal or work-related sojourns to TL-speaking countries (Germany and France) in their twenties were key formative experiences that influenced ongoing engagement with the target language and country throughout their professional lives.

The study reported herein aims to expand upon the research reviewed above through in-depth and descriptive examination of eight Japanese language learners’ post-study abroad life trajectories and ongoing interaction with Japanese speakers. The research questions guiding this study are:

1) How do L2 Japanese language learners engage with Japan, its language, and its speakers throughout their post-study abroad academic and career trajectories?
2) How is this reflected in their post-study abroad L2 self-concepts?

This study therefore contributes to the much-needed research on the longer-term impact of study abroad, especially in regard to ongoing interaction with the TL once students are removed from the host country. By focusing on learners of Japanese language who have studied abroad in Japan, this study also elaborates on previous study abroad research that has primarily concerned learners of English, Spanish, and other European languages.

Conceptual Framework
As a means of conceptualizing aspects of the participants’ (L2) identities and life trajectories, this study draws upon possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954), possible self-concepts pertain to “how individuals think about their potential and about their future.” More specifically, they define possible selves as representations of individuals’ ideas about what they might become (expected self), what they would like to become (hoped-for self), and what they are afraid of becoming (feared self). As such, individuals have both positive and negative future-oriented aspects of their self-concept. Although possible selves are derived from past experiences, they also impact upon one’s current identity and form an important connection between past, present, and future.
Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) state: “an individual’s repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats.” Possible selves are therefore important because they can act as a self-regulation and assessment mechanism: envisioning one’s future selves can orient current choices, behaviour, energy and effort to increase the possibility of attaining their positive and avoiding their negative possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & James, 2009; Strahan & Wilson, 2006). As explained by Oyserman and James (2009, p. 373), at any given time an individual’s self-concept includes numerous possible selves, which are “often linked with differing social roles and identities.” One is therefore likely to establish possible selves in domains relevant to current life tasks and activities, such as being a student or an employee. In other words, possible self-concepts change throughout the life course and, as such, are likely to influence changes in behaviour including social interaction and language usage.

Based upon Unemori, Omoregie, and Markus (2004), Nakamura (2015) has recently utilized the following four thematic categories for classifying the domains of Japanese language learners’ possible future self-concepts:
1. Interpersonal domain (communicating with friends, communicating with family, mediator)
2. Extracurricular domain (enjoying media, enjoying other hobbies)
3. Career domain (desired job)
4. Education domain (study abroad plan, concern for grades, mastering the language)

As Nakamura’s study concerned learners of Japanese language in an Australian context, his modified schema of domains of possible future selves also seemed applicable for analysis in the current study.

Research Method
The study reported in this article uses semi-longitudinal and cross-sectional data from a larger doctoral project (Campbell, 2015a) to examine Japanese language learners’ post-study abroad life trajectories and L2 self-concepts. A qualitative research approach was adopted because, as Patton (2002, p. 4) explains, the collection and analysis of qualitative data is a means of capturing rich and complex details of participants’ experiences, knowledge, opinions, and feelings, as well as daily activities, behaviour, interpersonal interactions and organizational processes. In this interpretive inquiry, value is placed on the emic perspective, as it has been argued that only the participants themselves can unveil the true meanings and interpretations of their experiences and behaviour (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38; Patton, 2002, p. 84).

Participants
The sample of this study is eight L2 learners of Japanese who had completed a university-level study abroad program in Japan and are native or near-native speakers of English. These participants were recruited via an email on my behalf from the Japanese study abroad coordinator at an Australian university to present and past study abroad students, an announcement of the research at the university’s Japanese language course tutorials, and an advertisement on an online Facebook community for current and alumni students of the university who are interested in Japanese language and cultural exchange.

While it is acknowledged that investigation of a single cohort of students would enhance the generalizability of findings, the broad selection criteria in this study was employed for two different but related reasons. First, the university from which the participants were recruited has
multiple exchange partners in various destinations in Japan, which accept students from introductory to advanced levels of Japanese proficiency. Most of these programs limit the number of participants from a single university to one or two students per intake, thus presenting difficulties in recruiting a single cohort with a uniform study abroad experience. Second, it was believed that by having relatively relaxed selection criteria, more diverse post-study abroad trajectories might emerge.

As indicated in Tables 1 and 2 below, participants’ backgrounds varied with regard to country of origin and pre-study abroad variables such as duration and level of Japanese language study and previous trips to Japan. The type of study abroad program participated in also differed, with placements at universities and language institutes, lasting six weeks to one year in duration. Furthermore, as this research is cross-sectional in nature, the dates of program participation ranged between 1997 and 2012. While it is recognized that differences in participants’ backgrounds and type of study abroad participation make direct comparisons and generalizations difficult, it should be noted that this was not the aim of the current study. Rather, this research endeavours to exploit the richness of the data, drawing out commonalities and idiosyncrasies from shared and differing experiences. All participants have been allocated pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. The participants are ordered in Tables 1 and 2 from the least approximate time since completing study abroad (Jane, 6 months) to the most (Angela, 15 years).

**Data collection and analysis**

Each of the eight participants participated in one to five in-depth, semi-structured interviews between July 2012 and September 2013. At the outset of this research it was planned that the interviews would be completed at three-to-four-month intervals; however, some intervals were extended or shortened in order to incorporate the participants’ busy schedules. Due to the semi-longitudinal and cross-sectional research design, Sophie and Phoebe, who were participating in study abroad at the commencement of the data collection, completed their first interview in Japan, whereas the other participants’ interviews were conducted at various locations, in person or via Skype, according to their post-study abroad movement. This semi-longitudinal data collection was supplemented by the use of retrospection, allowing data to reflect a longer time period than was possible through the longitudinal data alone. Two participants, Carla and Jane, withdrew from the study partway through. Thus, Carla participated in only one interview and Jane in only two. Each interview ranged from 30 minutes to two hours in duration, was conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim soon after completion. A summary of the number and timing of the participants’ interviews is provided in Table 3 below, ordered according to the date of the first interview.

In this article I have focused on interview questions that gathered data concerning the participants’ post-study abroad interaction with Japanese speakers, the impact of study abroad upon this, as well as any perceived impacts of study abroad on their lives thus far. It should be noted that examination of the participants’ identity was not an original goal of the larger doctoral project, and thus there were no interview questions specifically focusing on L2 self-concept. Rather, this emerged as an important concept throughout analysis of the interview data in relation to their ongoing life trajectories.

Each transcript was imported into QSR Nvivo data analysis software for thematic analysis. In the preliminary stage, the transcripts were coded using pre-determined themes such as “impact of study abroad,” “post-study abroad interaction,” and “identity.” Further within-case and cross-case comparative analysis was then guided by themes, categories and constructs drawn
from the literature review and conceptual framework outlined above.

Table 1: Participants’ Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender and Ethnicity</th>
<th>First language (s)</th>
<th>Years of Japanese study prior to university level study abroad</th>
<th>Length and purpose of trips to Japan prior to study abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female/Caucasian Australian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>University: 2.5</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N4 (Japanese 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2011 Two weeks, program was postponed in wake of Tohoku Disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>Female/Caucasian Australian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>High school: 6 University: 2</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N2 (Japanese 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2007 Five-week high school exchange (homestay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2011 One-week holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Male/Hispanic Colombian</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>High school: 5 University: 2</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N3 (Japanese 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Female/Caucasian Australian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Primary school: 7 High school: 6 University: 2.5</td>
<td>CEFR B2 JLPT N2 (Japanese 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2006 Two-week high school tour (homestay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Female/Caucasian New Zealander</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>High School: 5 University: 3</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N2 (Japanese 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2003 Three-week high school trip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Female/Caucasian French</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>High school exchange in Japan: 1 University: 1</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N2 (Japanese 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004 Three-week holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2005-2006 One-year high school exchange</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2006 One-month holiday to see host family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2007 Three one-week trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Male/Caucasian New Zealander</td>
<td>English, Polish</td>
<td>High school: 2 University: 1.5</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N2 (Japanese 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Female/Australian-born Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>High school: 3 University: 2.5</td>
<td>CEFR B1 JLPT N4 (Japanese 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The participants provided the level to which they had studied at their Australian university, where numbers correspond to number of semesters studied (e.g., Japanese 9 represents the level equivalent to nine semesters of study [from entry level] at this particular university). For ease of comparability, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) levels that the university deems equivalent to successful completion of each level have also been provided (see Council of Europe, 2001; The Japan Foundation, 2012).
Table 2: Participants’ Background Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Details of study abroad program in Japan</th>
<th>Approx. time since program completion&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Subsequent Japanese studies</th>
<th>Subsequent trips to Japan</th>
<th>Highest degree and current occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>One year (2011-2012) at university</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Semester 2, 2012 Japanese 8</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Full-time undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>One semester (2012) at university</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>Semester 1, 2013 Japanese 11</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Full-time undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>One year (2011-2012) at university</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Full-time undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Six weeks (June-July, 2012) at Language Institute</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>Semester 2, 2012 Japanese 10</td>
<td>July 2013 holiday (10 days)</td>
<td>Full-time undergraduate student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>One year (2008-2009) at university</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>2012 10-day research trip to Tokyo</td>
<td>Full-time doctoral student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>One year (2008) at university</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>2009 Japanese 10, 11 &amp; 12; 2010 Intensive Japanese course at university in Tokyo (one year)</td>
<td>July 2009 holiday (3 weeks); Dec. 2009 holiday (1 week); 2010 Intensive Japanese course at university (1 year); June 2013 Commenced working in Japan</td>
<td>Completed Master’s degree; Working at a company in Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>One year (2007-2008), research scholar at university</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>2011-2012 Honours student in Japanese/Korean; 2013-present PhD in Japanese translation</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Full-time doctoral student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>One year (1997-1998) at university</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>1999 Honors in Japanese</td>
<td>1999 Research trip (1 week); 2003 holiday (3 weeks); 2006 holiday (1 week); 2007 holiday (1 week); 2010 holiday (1 week)</td>
<td>Completed undergraduate degree with honors; Working at an Australian law firm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>2</sup>Age at commencement of data collection.

<sup>3</sup>Approximate time since program completion at end of data collection.
**Findings and discussion**

The sections below provide discussion of the participants’ life trajectories post-study abroad, commencing with an overview of how study abroad experiences impacted ongoing engagement with Japan and Japanese speakers once the participants completed their programs. The latter sections then explore the relationships between study abroad, significant life events, ongoing interaction with Japanese speakers, and/or L2 self-concept. Here, discussion is focused around two key categories that emerged both in the literature review and in the data: continued studies and career path.

**Looking back, moving forward**

Each of the participants in this study exhibited an ongoing interest in Japan, which was often intensified by their study abroad experiences. The view of most of the participants is well summed up in a comment by Angela: “I think there is a special place for Japanese people in my heart because of that one year.” In the vast majority of cases, study abroad appeared to induce explorations of identity, of future goals, and of the place for Japanese in the participants’ lives. As will be further illustrated in the sections below, while the majority of participants incorporated Japan and Japanese speakers into their lives post-study abroad, the degree to which they did was often associated with their study abroad experiences and degree of dis/satisfaction.

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4 For discussion of informants’ experiences during study abroad, refer to Campbell (2014, in press).
Satisfaction with NS interaction during study abroad. It was found that participants who effectively established networks with NSs and had plentiful opportunities to use the TL during study abroad often continued to create opportunities for interaction, network development/maintenance, and TL use during study abroad, also enthusiastically engaged in Japan-related clubs, associations or groups post-study abroad. Importantly, Angela explained that socializing and establishing friendships with Japanese NSs in Australia was her “chance to give back the same amount of hospitality that people showed [her] in that one year [of study abroad].”

Although Phoebe was overwhelmingly satisfied with the networks she established during study abroad, unlike the aforementioned participants, she primarily relied on “required meeting contexts” (Allan, 1979, p. 138) provided by her study abroad program structure to bring her into contact with NSs. Interestingly, this behaviour continued in the post-study abroad period, where she did not appear to be proactive in seeking out opportunities to meet and interact with TL speakers and, as such, had not yet established any further NS contacts since returning to Australia after her study abroad completion 1.5 years earlier.

Dissatisfaction with NS interaction during study abroad. In contrast to the findings above, it was found that participants who were dissatisfied with their interactions and/or degree of network development with NSs during study abroad went in one of two directions. The first of these was a “turning of the page” on engagement with Japanese language and its speakers. Especially Carla indicated that after study abroad completion she rarely interacted with NSs or used the TL for communicative purposes. Although Carla had envisaged herself as becoming a competent and fluent speaker of Japanese as a result of studying abroad, she was disappointed in her achievements and felt as though she had “wasted the opportunity that [she] was given.” At the time of her sole interview, although she wished that she did “have the ability to use [Japanese],” she commented that: “it would take so much for me to get up to a level where I can use it that I’m unwilling to put effort in at this stage.” From a possible selves perspective, Oyserman and James (2009, p. 373) explain that discrepancies between current and future selves may arise when subjective affective experience such as difficulty “is interpreted as meaning that the possible self is too hard to attain or that enough effort has already been expended.” This appears to have been the result of Carla’s experiences, which meant that she did not at that time have, or envisage having, any interaction with NSs, nor did she have any desire to use Japanese in the future.

In contrast to Carla’s experience, Sophie recognized the importance of the little interaction she achieved with NSs during study abroad, and appeared to reflect upon this paucity of interaction to establish strategies for enhancing her interaction and social networks with TL speakers after returning home:

I started realising that I wasn’t learning Japanese every day and I wasn’t USING the language. It made me really worried that every day is just another day that the language is slipping and it forced me more to immerse myself in the cultural things that are available to me here in Melbourne.

In other words, it became apparent that Sophie’s feared possible self-concept as someone unable to use Japanese influenced her decision to increase her interaction with Japanese language and culture. She attended Japanese festivals and conferences, and dined at Japanese restaurants not only as an investment in her Japanese language, but also as a means of network development and maintenance. For example, she mentioned that she specifically attended a “Japanese conference
for undergraduate students” because she was “interested in making some more Japanese friends … to practice Japanese.” In sum, it was found that while study abroad behaviours were predictive of return behaviours for the majority of participants, Sophie’s data indicated an example of wanting to make up for lost opportunities during study abroad.

When asked to comment on their post-study abroad networks, Oscar mentioned that “friendships are very much about where [his] life is at at the moment” and Alex believed that interaction is significantly influenced by “the flow of life.” Indeed, previous scholarship has found that as individuals move through various contexts and life stages, they are presented with different meeting opportunities that influence the types of potential network members they come across (Bidart & Lavenu, 2005; Feld & Carter, 1998; Marsden, 1990). The remainder of this article thus provides discussion of the participants’ life trajectories post-study abroad, focusing on the key life stages of continuation of studies and career path.

Continuation of Studies
Impact of study abroad on continuation of studies. All of the participants mentioned a desire to continue with Japanese studies post-study abroad, though Carla and Oscar were unable to do so due to various university degree requirements. For Phoebe, study abroad “rekindled [her] love for Japanese” and sparked a desire to maintain the language through both formal and informal study. In other words, study abroad reinforced her commitment to the TL. Similarly, Sophie stated:

[Study abroad] had a big impact on study, not just Japanese but future science as well … I think my experience will kind of push me into thinking about Honours, or taking the relevant steps. I’d love to do maybe science translation or something like that.

It is evident that Phoebe and Sophie envisaged themselves using Japanese in the future and that study abroad strengthened the link between Japanese and the educational domains of their possible self-concepts. Although the other focal participants did not explicitly mention the impact of study abroad on their further studies, the fact that Angela went on to do Honours, Marie proceeded to a Master’s, and Alex to a doctoral program in Japan-related fields clearly indicates their ongoing interest in Japan and Japanese studies.

Continuation of studies and engagement with TL-speaking networks. As one might assume, continuation of studies and, especially, of Japanese studies appeared to have a positive relationship with ongoing interaction and networks with Japanese speakers post-study abroad. It was found that continuation of studies provided an important shared activity that facilitated interaction with non-native speaker networks maintained from study abroad. Especially Facebook was sometimes used as a means for sharing content related to Japanese language learning. For example, Sophie explained that in her Facebook Group of study abroad peers, “off and on people post videos, tips for studying, [and] good resources they find.” Phoebe also explained that she would occasionally discuss new content she had learned in Japanese class with friends maintained from study abroad.5

In order to enhance their opportunities for face-to-face interaction with Japanese speakers, many of the participants engaged in Japan-related extra-curricular activities. This can be considered a kind of targeted socialization, which Sias et al. (2008, p. 9) refer to as “socialising opportunities targeted toward either specific cultural groups or intercultural gatherings.” As

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5 The ways in which Facebook is utilized with study abroad contacts post-program completion is discussed in detail in Campbell (2015b).
mentioned above, participants who actively engaged in targeted socialization post-study abroad were often those who had actively sought out relationships with NSs during study abroad, transferring this strategy to their post-study abroad contexts. Especially Alex and Angela indicated that after returning to their home universities, they each signed up for Language Exchange programs, and established a number of NS contacts, some of whom they were still in contact with at the time of the study. Oscar and Jane were also members of Japan-related clubs at university at the time of their initial interviews, and Angela had been a member in 1999, prior to her graduation. As Oscar’s comment below indicates, such clubs naturally draw together large numbers of Japanese speakers.

Rikki: Since you’ve come back [from exchange], are there any new Japanese people that you’ve come in contact with?
Oscar: Yeah—just Japanese Club. Well, I’m on the Club committee now … the Club just started back so there were like 70 Japanese students on Thursday.

In an interview six months later, however, Oscar also highlighted the nature of Clubs and their associated activities as “required meeting contexts.”

Oscar: My committee is about to finish so I suppose I will stop seeing all of them. Especially like, well Mayuko has gone to Japan so I only hear of her through Facebook and through [my girlfriend]. Takako, I will probably stop seeing her I suppose because we’re not friends I suppose … Dave I’ve already stopped seeing. He hasn’t been coming to the last few meetings so I doubt that I’ll see him.

Rikki: Okay so really your interaction there is focused on the committee?
Oscar: Yeah. As I said, my friendships are very much about where my life is at at the moment.

In other words, as Mollenhorst, Volker, and Flap (2014) found, when previously forced interactions in a shared context cease, relationships are likely to be discontinued.

In addition to targeted socialization within the university, several of the participants also mentioned attending Japan-related associations and events outside university. For example, when Marie was completing her Master’s course, she actively participated in a Japanese Language Group as well as two Japanese University Alumni Groups that were held in her local city. As mentioned above, Sophie also immersed herself in Japan-related places and events locally available to her. Importantly, she commented that although people at these activities “may not be able to speak Japanese, [these] things could kind of quench a certain area and hold onto that [connection with Japan].” Sophie’s use of the term “quench” here clearly exposes the intensity of her passion—or thirst—for Japan.

In contrast, several other participants mentioned that, although they desired to engage in targeted socialization and further develop their Japanese-speaking networks, opportunities to do so were negatively impacted by their “availability” (Fehr, 2000, p. 72). Alex, for example, commented: “The PhD has had a huge influence I think. Not just in terms of Japanese interaction, but in terms of any interaction at all with anybody.” Similarly, Phoebe explained that although she was interested in joining a Japanese conversation group, “the uni[versity] study schedule tends to make it just a little bit difficult to actually have the time to meet up with people, to go out of your way to meet up with people who speak Japanese.” This last phrase highlights the

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6 A Language Exchange program introduces local students and international students to one another for the purpose of promoting opportunities for reciprocal L2 practice. Usually, the two students are native speakers of the languages each other is learning (see Lybeck, 2002).
important role that agency plays when TL learners are removed from the host country and no longer have easy access to interactional opportunities with NSs.

*Career Path*

*Career goals and preparing to enter the workforce.* Although all but two of the focal participants (Marie and Angela) were still students at the completion of data collection, comments concerning future career goals and the impact of study abroad were plentiful. First, both Sophie and Phoebe indicated that their experiences abroad helped clarify their career goals. Phoebe mentioned that she was considering applying for the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) when she graduated. She explained:

I’d thought about JET before—before going on Exchange … [but] I always figured I’d make my decision after I got back … So I went there and I realised that I loved living in the country … I’d say the actual experience of doing it and coming back and talking with people who have been on JET or who are preparing for JET and lots of other Exchange students who are doing JET at the moment. This has kind of influenced me.

From this, it appears that there is a kind of in-group of study abroad people who may shape or reinforce each other’s future self-concepts. Phoebe further indicated that if she were not successful with JET, she would also like to be involved in translation or diplomacy, indicating that the career domain of her possible self-concept clearly involved Japanese.

Similarly, Sophie, Oscar, and Alex also desired to work in Japan-related fields. Both Sophie and Oscar desired a career that linked their two passions: food science and Japanese, for Sophie; actuary consulting and Japanese, for Oscar. Alex’s career goal, meanwhile, was in Japanese translation, the field in which he had recently started a doctoral degree program. He explained:

[Japanese] is one of the major pillars of my academic career, it’s what I’m looking at doing … Obviously because I’m in translation studies I’m focussing on Japanese now, predominantly Japanese. So it’s really important that I maintain my Japanese ability.

However, Alex only seldom had interaction with the five members of his Japanese-speaking network post-study abroad. Rather, his primary means of investing in his language maintenance was to consistently draw upon online resources such as YouTube and Japanese newspapers (extra-curricular domain). In contrast, especially Oscar demonstrated a relationship between his career goals and Japanese-speaking networks. Specifically, he mentioned that he had recently “been trying to do things to help [his] professional career one day,” such as going to lunches for young actuaries, connecting with people from “the industry” on LinkedIn, and attending Japanese conferences.

Although Oscar and Alex did not specifically comment on the impact of study abroad on their career goals, the findings above indicate that Phoebe, Sophie, Oscar, and Alex each envisage themselves using Japanese in their future careers and that there is an evident link between Japanese and the career domain of their possible self-concepts. Furthermore, while the desire to keep an association with Japanese was found to inspire career goals, career goals could also influence the study of Japanese, indicating a two-way relationship.

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7 The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) is a Japanese government initiative that brings graduates to Japan as Assistant (English) Language Teachers or Sports Education Advisors in local schools, or as Coordinators for International Relations in local governments and boards of Education (http://www.jetprogramme.org/).
In contrast to the participants above, Carla had no desire to return to Japan for work or to incorporate Japanese language into her career. Although she had recently enjoyed an 11-day trip to Japan, she commented on the prospect of living and working there as follows:

Carla: [During my recent trip to Japan] people would say, “You should try it. You should come and work here when you finish your PhD.” And I was like, “not on your life.” There is no way. I know I will go back to Japan many, many times in the future ... But there’s no way that I would live there, ever. There’s no way that I would even think of applying for a job there.

Rikki: And why is that?
Carla: It was so isolating ... you are always foreign. You are always stared at.

In another publication (Campbell, in press), I have highlighted how Sophie, Jane, and other young women in my larger doctoral project also experienced “racially shattering” events (Ting-Toomey, 2005) during their study abroad period, which led to a heightened awareness of Self and Other. While the other participants’ positive intercultural experiences outweighed the negative, Carla’s study abroad experience remained overwhelmingly negative. This clearly impacted on her life trajectory and future self-concept, whereby, although her career path is still uncertain, it is evident that there is no connection between her career domain of future self and Japan or Japanese language.

Career trajectory and TL-speaking networks. Marie and Angela were the only participants who held full time jobs throughout this study, and their interviews presented contrasting experiences. In her initial interview, Marie mentioned her plans to move to Japan for work the following year. When asked if she had already organized a job, she explained “Not yet, but I’m not stressed about it because I know so many people working there and working here [in Australia], contacts of contacts. That’ll be fine.” In her following interview four months later, Marie indicated that by both drawing upon her existing Japanese-speaking network and further expanding it to include members of Japanese businesses in Australia, she had successfully acquired a job in a Japanese company “without looking for it.” Furthermore, she reported on the impact of her new job in Japan on her network expansion: “all my new contacts since January are from the company, and [the CEO’s] family.”

Angela, on the other hand, had been working in Law since her graduation in 2000 and recalled that the jobs she had previously applied for “never required Japanese, and never led [her] to use Japanese in the job situation.” Although she did not follow a Japan-related career path, she has consistently been involved in a number of different Japan-related extracurricular activities throughout most of her working life and it was evident from her interviews that they have offered ample opportunities for interaction and network development with Japanese speakers. Having been a member a Japan-related association for more than a decade, Angela recalled that she initially joined because she “wanted to continue with Japanese.” She also continues to seek out Language Exchange partners as a means to “keep in touch” and “not forget” her Japanese. No longer studying or working in Japan-related fields, Angela explained:

It gets harder and harder to keep up, but I don’t want to do nothing and let it all go, it’d be such a waste, because I’ve managed to sort of do what I can to keep up some level of Japanese until now. So I think I just want to keep working at it [through self-study] and doing language exchange ... If you went and saw your friends in Japan again and you couldn’t communicate with them you’d just feel so sad.
In other words, Angela’s feared possible self-concept as someone who can no longer speak Japanese motivates her to engage in ongoing self-study and Language Exchange so as to maintain her language proficiency, and it is evident that there is a strong link between Japanese and the interpersonal domain of her possible self-concept.

Conclusion
By employing a cross-sectional and semi-longitudinal perspective, this study has provided valuable insight into the impact of study abroad on language learners’ life trajectories and ongoing engagement with the TL country, its language, and its speakers. Although previous studies have investigated various personal and professional outcomes of study abroad, this is the first known study to focus on such aspects in specific regard to learners of Japanese language. While it did not reveal any findings identifiable as specific to Japan/Japanese, I nevertheless strongly encourage future study abroad researchers to examine the experiences of learners of other Asian languages, as these remain largely unrepresented in the existing literature.

In line with research concerning learners of other languages such as Spanish or English, this study found that, in most cases, the experience of studying abroad in Japan (re)ignited or strengthened a passion for and identity with Japan, which was then maintained or built on throughout various life stages. In particular, the majority of participants incorporated the target language and culture into their ongoing studies or career trajectories, and continued to interact with TL speakers. It was also evident that study abroad strengthened the link between Japanese and the educational, career, and/or interpersonal domains of their future self-concepts. On the other hand, an uncommonly reported instance of how a less-positive study abroad experience can lead to reduced desire to engage with Japan, Japanese language, and its speakers and the exclusion of Japan-related aspects of future self-concept was also observed.

Given the participant recruitment method, the majority of findings of this study should be interpreted as indicative of the benefits of positive study abroad experiences, and especially of the experience of those whose study abroad experience impacts their ongoing engagement with the TL language and interest in the language more strongly. As such, they should be considered not necessarily as representative of a norm, but rather as indicative of possible trajectories and experiences at the positive end of the post-study abroad spectrum. Future studies could address this limitation of survivor bias by investigating whole cohorts of study abroad students (if they exist) and, preferably, by gaining their consent to participate in the research prior to or during their study abroad program.

In conclusion, while further research is needed to investigate the experiences of larger groups of participants and of learners of a variety of different languages, it is hoped that this study has helped pave the way for future studies seeking a deeper understanding of the ways in which study abroad students continue to engage with the TL country and TL speakers after program completion and throughout their life trajectories.

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