

Second Language Identity Development and Study Abroad: The Case of Irish University Students in Japan

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Abstract

This study explores the second language (L2) identity development of four Irish university students who participated in a 4 to 10-month study abroad (SA) programme in Japan. Drawing on Benson et al.'s (2013) model of potential L2 identity development during SA, narrative interviews were conducted to investigate the critical experiences that resulted in student sojourners' L2 identity development. The findings illustrate that each returner underwent different trajectories to enhance their L2 identities from interacting with local people to confronting their psychological obstacles. They particularly enhanced the aspects of intercultural competence, national and cultural identities, and academic achievement through L2. The L2 identity development of the participants was strongly correlated with their sense of belongingness in local communities and their personal interests and beliefs. Furthermore, this development was accelerated by the fact that they were anglophone students. The findings of this study have implications for language teachers and SA coordinators that will help facilitate fruitful SA experiences for sojourners. In addition, the study recommends further exploration into the mechanisms of sojourners' psychological challenges and the identities of ethnic minority student sojourners, contributing to a deeper understanding of SA and L2 identity development.

Keywords: second language identity, study abroad, identity, Japanese language learning

Introduction

According to the annual report by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2020), of the 14,943 tertiary-level students who crossed borders from Ireland, only 39 travelled to Japan. In contrast, over 10,000 students went to the UK followed by 997 to the US and 567 to France. While a significant number of studies have been conducted on second language (L2) identity development in study abroad (SA) contexts (e.g., Benson et al.,

2013; Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2017; Plew, 2015; Umino & Benson, 2016), there remains a considerable gap in the literature regarding students from Irish universities experiencing long-term SA programmes in Japan.

Given this disparity, the SA experience in Japan is relatively unique and needs closer examination, particularly in terms of the facets of L2 identity that develop, and the factors that influence this development. This paper explores the narratives of four Irish university students who returned from a long-term exchange programme in Japan. By analysing their narratives through the lens of L2 identity development, this research identifies the key elements of successful SA experiences; intercultural competence, negotiating their national and cultural identities, and academic development. It also highlights the main influential factors, including a sense of belonging, personal interests and beliefs, native English speaker status, and the ability to overcome psychological challenges. These findings contribute to understand how L2 learners from Anglophone countries construct their L2 identities, language proficiency, and intercultural competence within specific cultural contexts. These insights offer valuable guidance to support future SA students.

L2 Identity Development

Post-structuralists view identity as fluid and fragmentary, shaped by external influences (Bauman, 2004). According to Benson et al. (2013), L2 identities are those shaped by and related to L2 learning. Norton (2000) sees identity in the context of L2 learning, as an individual's evolving understanding of their relationship with the world. In the SA research, both the social and individual aspects of identities are emphasised, which evolve across various contexts (Benson et al., 2013). Benson et al. also argue that L2

can serve as an identity resource, enabling learners to construct new aspects of themselves through language and cultural engagement during sojourns.

Identity Categories and Resources

Research on cultural identity in SA delves deeper than mere surface-level cultural adjustments, encompassing aspects of intercultural and global identities (Pearson-Evans, 2006; Jackson, 2008; DuFon, 2006). For instance, the food habits of sojourners can serve as a reflection of their self-construction and cultural identities tied to their homeland (Hanna, 2016). Kim (2015) defines intercultural identity as an individual's identity that is shaped through interactions with diverse cultural groups. This identity formation involves processes such as acculturation, deculturation, and a stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Kim). Similarly, Ryan (2006) proposed that global identity emerges when an individual feels actively involved in global processes, which can potentially supersede other social identities, such as nationality or ethnicity. However, Kubota (2016) counters this notion, arguing that the experiences of student sojourners have inherent limitations that contradict the concept of developing global identity. Furthermore, multicultural identity involves a sense of 'in-betweenness' that arises from frequent or multiple cultural border crossings (Martin and Nakayama, 2008, as cited in Dervin and Jackson, 2018).

Studies on SA have explored 'identity categories and resources' (Benson et al., 2013), with a focus on national identity. American sojourners often experience strengthened national identity during their sojourns, leading to ethnocentrism (Isabelli-García, 2006; Polanyi, 1995; Kinginger, 2008). Similar phenomena have been observed among Hong Kong students in Britain (Jackson, 2008) and Irish students in Japan (Pearson-Evans, 2006).

In contrast, ethnic identity, a less-studied social category, is seen as a collective identity based on shared cultural beliefs and practices (Kinging, 2013). Ethnic minority students' SA experiences often reveal racial challenges and individual experiences (Anya, 2011). Despite the multiracial nature of contemporary France and Spain, European student sojourners rarely discuss ethnicity (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Although religious identity is receiving growing interest (Joseph, 2004), a limited number of studies have been done on religious identity and L2 learning, especially in the SA context (e.g., Elliott & Romito, 2018; Dinani, 2018). Dinani (2018) argued that faith communities had the greatest impact on African American student sojourners' identity during their SA experience.

SA and L2 Identity Development

SA research has examined sojourners' experiences and identity contexts (Devlin, 2014). Jackson (2008) studied Hong Kong students in the UK, focusing on identity and language perceptions. Successful SA factors included host receptivity, community quality, personality traits, and L2 learning investment. Benson et al. (2013) found that sojourners' L2 identity developed through host-society interaction. Mitchell et al. (2017) emphasised preparedness and talent for successful sojourns, noting that extended stays boosted self-confidence and L2 agency. However, Isabelli-Garcia et al. (2018) observed a lack of longitudinal studies on sojourn experiences' impact on identity development.

Research on adult learners of Japanese as L2 in SA contexts has focused on sociolinguistic interactions, and social networks (Pearson-Evans, 2006; Dewey et al., 2012; Umino & Benson, 2016). Umino and Benson (2016) found that opportunities for interaction often depended on students' own initiative and intent. Hasegawa (2019)

revealed varying social network patterns among SA students, with some using English as a lingua franca to overcome communication barriers. Pearson-Evans (2006) revealed that ethnic networks and institutionally arranged relationships hindered adjustment. Interestingly, higher L2 proficiency did not necessarily correlate with readiness for SA, and in some cases, appeared to create more barriers.

Mitchell et al. (2017) and Hasegawa (2019) highlight the emergence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in SA contexts, noting its role in facilitating plurilingual communication and lowering language barriers. They suggest anglophone students should leverage English to access local networks. English-medium instruction (EMI) programmes also impact anglophone students (Kubota, 2016; Rose & McKinley, 2017), though they may contradict students' global citizenship goals and standardise English communication.

While positive attitudes during SA are linked to the development of intercultural self-identity (Plews, 2015), Benson et al. (2013) observed that cross-cultural misunderstandings could also foster growth in intercultural competence. However, measuring intercultural adjustment remains subjective (Pearson-Evans, 2006) and the limited intercultural exposure of students during their sojourn were pointed out (Courtois, 2017; Dervin and Jackson, 2018).

Overall, while SA research offers insightful individual trajectories into language use and intercultural competence, several limitations remain. First, research examining ethnic and religious identities in SA contexts is scarce. Second, longitudinal studies focusing on L2 identity development of European students in East Asian countries are underdeveloped.

Theoretical Framework

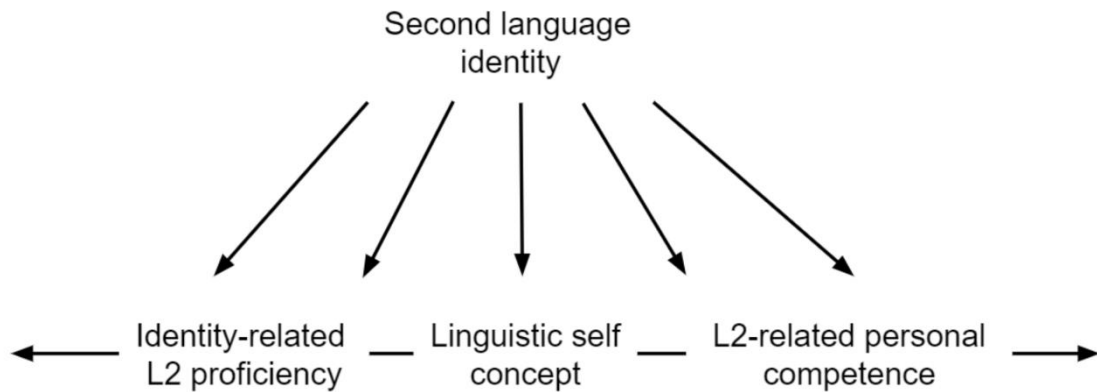
Although the research on L2 identity and SA is extensive, a notable gap in understanding the long-term SA experiences of university students from Ireland to Japan exists. Also, studies focusing on the role of personal background and beliefs in L2 identity development of sojourners are limited. To address these gaps, this study poses the following questions: (1) Which particular facets of L2 identity developed? (2) What factors facilitated the enhancement of students' L2 identity?

This study adopts Benson et al. (2013)'s framework for potential L2 outcomes of SA (Figure 1). This framework was chosen for its systematic tracking of three L2 identity development aspects: 'Identity-related L2 proficiency', 'linguistic self-concept', and 'L2-related personal competence'. These dimensions cover sociopragmatic competence, learners' self-perception as target language users, and non-linguistic outcomes such as personal growth and intercultural competence. This model enables analysis of individual experiences as well as identifying patterns in how sojourners develop their L2 identity across multiple dimensions.

Using Benson et al.'s (2013) framework, the first question aims to identify the most salient aspects of L2 identity development among participants, potentially finding patterns that differ from previous studies. The second question explores impactful events that contributed to L2 identity development, which could inform effective pedagogical practices.

Figure 1

Benson et al.'s (2013) model of potential second language outcomes of study abroad



Methodology

This study employed narrative inquiry interviews for case studies involving four participants. Narrative inquiry, as Barkhuizen (2015) explains, focuses on participants' life stories, providing insights from their perspectives. This approach was particularly suited for this study, as it allows participants to tell their stories subjectively with their own words. While acknowledging the subjectivity of narratives, researchers aim to understand the meanings participants attach to their experiences (Barkhuizen, 2015). The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of individual experiences (Muramatsu, 2018).

This methodology supported the research questions in two ways. First, the first research question explored specific dimensions of L2 identity development, for which individual case studies provided the rich data necessary to track these developments within Benson et al.'s (2013) framework. Second, the second question focused on revealing critical moments and turning points. Narrative inquiry enabled participants to

reflect on their experiences in depth and capture important details that might have been missed with a more structured survey.

As a Japanese language teacher and long-term Irish resident, my familiarity with both cultures could have influenced this study. The participants, my former students, were carefully selected to minimise bias and power dynamics. I primarily listened during the interviews, only interjecting for clarification or prepared questions. The study was ethically approved by the university committee, and participants reviewed their interview transcriptions.

Participants

The participant selection was deliberate, focusing on a group that has been underrepresented in L2 identity and SA research. The participants (see Table 1) were Japanese language learners completing four-year undergraduate courses at an Irish university (home university). Engaging in 4 to 10 months of overseas exchange programs in Japan during their third year. In their early 20s during the sojourn, the two females and two males considered English as their L1. Besides Japanese, they studied two or more languages. None had an Asian heritage or Japanese background, spending most of their childhood near their home university.

Table 1

Profile of participants

Name	Gender	Major	Japanese language competence before the sojourn	Time in Japan
Issac	male	World Languages	CEFR A2.2	4 months
Emily	female	World Languages	CEFR A2.1	10 months

Patrick	male	World Languages	CEFR A2.1	10 months
Nora	female	Politics/Asian studies	CEFR A1	10 months

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This research utilised various data sources, including pre-interview surveys, semi-structured interviews, video presentations, social media messages, and participant artefacts. The primary data came from the interviews and surveys. The pre-interview survey confirmed participants' language backgrounds and SA experiences. Interviews were conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions, with one exception. The table below summarises the interview details:

Table 2

Post-sojourn interview

Interviewees	Issac	Emily	Patrick	Nora
Method	face-to-face	online	online	online
Tool	smartphone recording application	zoom video conferencing	zoom video conferencing	zoom video conferencing
Number of interviews	1	3	2	2
Length of interview(s)	51 minutes	94 minutes	81 minutes	128 minutes

Interviews were guided by questions adapted from Avarguez et al (2014), focusing on pre-sojourn expectations and critical experiences. Transcriptions were immediately analysed, screened for audio quality, and approved by participants. Using an inductive approach, data were coded based on Benson et al.'s (2013) model, which

allowed theoretical consistency and flexibility for analysing individual cases and comparing across cases.

Findings

The findings of this study are presented through four stories, each illustrating that SA experiences related to L2 identity development are highly individual and unique. Key findings indicated that the development of L2-related personal competence was most prominent among the three dimensions of Benson et al.'s (2013) model. Three central themes, intercultural competence, national and cultural identities, and academic development emerged in relation to L2 identity development. The influential factors of these developments were, the perceived advantage of being anglophone, a sense of belonging, psychological challenge, and personal beliefs and interests.

Issac's Story

Issac is of Nigerian heritage and moved to Ireland at the age of five from the Netherlands. He began learning Japanese in secondary school and pursued a BA in World Languages.

While Issac was working as an English assistant at the host university, he was surprised by the Japanese third-level education system. Japanese students revealed that job hunting starts in the third year, with companies hiring and training students, regardless of their university studies. Isaac prefers the “Western approach”, emphasising studying relevant skills for future job satisfaction, linking the Japanese approach to lower job satisfaction and job-related suicides in Japan.

Issac found a Baptist church near the host university and attended regularly. Motivated by a desire to participate in something akin to a tradition he grew up with,

Issac sought out a Baptist church online. He enjoyed the warm reception and the opportunity to engage with the community. The warmth and hospitality extended by the church community left a lasting impression on him. Issac not only forged friendships but also had the opportunity to engage in conversations with elderly members.

I got to make some friends to talk to someone, the, the elderly people there...aa...I got to, like the experience, like reading the bible in Japanese and I can be listening to the sermon in Japanese.. and it was very interesting. [Interview extract]

His regular visits to the church significantly contributed to the improvement of his Japanese. He thought “Having learned applied in everyday life, it was really really cool. [...] So my Japanese definitely did improve when I was there.” He learned niche vocabulary, and he witnessed his new learning in the classroom was also applied in his everyday life. For instance, he learned a word, 導く *michibiku* (to lead/guide [formal]) in the class, and when he went to the church, the pastor prayed for him, “神様アイザックを導いてください *Kamisama Issac o michibiite kudasai* (My Lord, please show Issac the way he should go)”.

In Japan, Issac did not miss Irish food, preferring Japanese food. “I didn't really feel homesick for food [...] I missed my mum's cooking a little bit, a little bit but...otherwise, I prefer, I prefer Japan for food”. He elaborated on his mother's dishes and the staple food in Nigeria. Drawing parallels to Japan, Issac emphasised the commonality of utilising rice in Nigerian cuisine, which he particularly enjoyed.

Issac's SA experiences did not bolster his national identity, given his limited attachment to it. He identified “I see myself more just as European than Irish” and “more global”.

He found connections with Japanese customs and culture, seeing similarities with Nigerian culture, “I did feel like I did connect with the Japanese way of doing

things... I saw a lot of similarities with that.” He appreciated the respect for elders and cleanliness in Japan, which he found lacking in Europe, “I related more to Japanese people in that sense than in Europe.” He felt more connected to the communal consideration in Japan, contrasting it with Europe’s individualism.

Because the way you like, treat elders you have to be really respectful, um, which is something that isn’t really prevalent in European culture. So, that would some, I felt quite Japanese because, that was also, that was because my background from similar to my mum’s point of view. Am...from a Nigerian perspective. um, aaa, what else um, in terms of cleanness, as well.

[...] Because here is very individualistic. Everyone’s about yourself, you know. So people don’t really pay attention to how their actions, kind of affect other people, especially if it’s public stuff, toilets, like...[laugh], but in Japan, people really care about those things, I found myself um, more drawn to that, relating more with Japanese people that way. [interview extract]

Emily’s Story

Raised in an Irish family in the city of her home university, Emily developed an interest in Japanese subculture during her childhood, officially beginning her Japanese language studies in her secondary school.

Emily arrived in Japan full of confidence, but her self-assurance waned upon encountering exceptionally fluent non-native Japanese speakers. Her struggle to communicate with native speakers further dented her confidence. However, a period of self-reflection helped her realise that her abilities and goals differed from other international students. While many lacked career clarity, Emily had a clear vision of pursuing a master’s degree and honing other skills. This realisation helped her regain her confidence. Also, Emily was assigned a tutor, a Japanese female student who had been to Emily’s home university, and she was able to speak comfortably with her. They engaged in tandem learning and became good friends.

When Emily decided to extend her stay, she had to look for accommodation. Once she moved out of the university dormitory to a shared apartment, she felt much more content. It made her feel more “a part of the outside community”, rather than “just

an exchange student”. The experiences such as getting to know the neighbours yielded a sense of being a society member.

when I first moved in, I was walking to the university (...). And I used to pass this old man with 柴犬 *shiba-inu* (Japanese breed of dog) ...and that, when I passed in the morning, I kind of smiled at him or said ‘good morning’. And so maybe for a month or two, he was just a ..looking at me strangely. But then by the end of the year, we would stop and chat. And I wasn’t, I still don’t know his name. I never asked. But it made me feel a lot more like a member of society. Or a member of, I guess, Japanese society, um, than I was living in the dorms. [interview extract]

In Japan, Emily researched beauty concepts for her study, noting differences between her and her Japanese friends’ perceptions. She explained that although beauty could be a source of pressure for women, it was largely related to confidence building. Coming across a poster for the ‘100% Girls Campaign’ by a hair removal company strongly inspired her academic research. She thought that the poster was unusual as the women in the poster were all largely different in ethnicity, body shape and height, “it really impacts me, because I’m also different, I don’t look like the model or whatever. [...] it seems to me that there is at least some kinds of inclusion and diversity that would be introduced in the mainstream.”

Her Irish identity was reinforced in Japan, often explaining Ireland’s distinction from the UK. She embraced multilingualism, using English, Japanese, and Korean, and participating in a German-Japanese meetup. On returning to Ireland, she felt her travel habits had shaped a “more multicultural identity”.

Patrick’s Story

Patrick, who was raised in a rural part of Ireland within an Irish family, demonstrated an aptitude for languages from an early age. His interest in Japanese culture led him to start learning the language in his first year of university.

Working part-time at an Irish bar, Patrick honed his Japanese under high-pressure customer interactions, “because like, high pressure and you don’t want customers to be angry at you if you can’t understand”. He used English with his manager and some colleagues while conversing in Japanese with others and customers. This job taught him customer service language and Keigo (honorific language). He practised Keigo with older customers and conversed casually with those his age. Despite not making close friends at university, he formed friendships at work. Additionally, he taught conversational English to Japanese businesspeople twice a week at a language school.

In Japan, Patrick had to explain Ireland in terms of location “it’s a small country next to イギリス *igirisu* (the UK)” and differentiation from Iceland. He expressed that “when you are abroad you want to help people to understand your culture more” and he visited schools to do a presentation about Ireland and introduced Irish culture and Irish food. In the host university, students talked about the Irish language and some British students claimed that Irish was not a language. Consequently, Irish students became quite defensive and tried to explain that “Irish was a real language”.

A food enthusiast, Patrick was optimistic for Japanese cuisine. His stay in Japan not only met these expectations but also transformed his eating habits. He grew fond of daily rice meals, fish, and pumpkins at the university canteen - foods he seldom ate in Ireland. Despite discovering and enjoying new dishes, he missed Ireland’s crusty bread and creamy cheese. By Christmas, he had adapted to the ‘light and not so dense’ Japanese food, finding the ‘heavy, filling, and creamy’ Irish food a stark contrast.

At the host university, Patrick enrolled in a Japanese and Spanish translation class as an elective, finding it enjoyable and beneficial. The class primarily catered to Japanese speakers learning Spanish, but for Patrick and his friend, who were not native

speakers of either language, the challenge of translating a Japanese novel into Spanish was fun. Despite both not having Japanese as their native language, they found the class to be good practice for Spanish.

Nora's Story

From rural Ireland, Nora pursued politics and Asian studies, driven by her fascination with Japanese culture.

Nora found it valuable to connect with locals through her work as an English language assistant job at the host university. She made a few good friends “which otherwise not have met”. While at work, she could advise some students who wanted to go to Ireland “it was really good for me to be able to help them and give some advice, what to do and not to do”.

Into the third month of her sojourn, Nora experienced “a bad mental situation”, which went on for some months. “I was kind of feeling very low, low mentally, like I felt really isolated a little bit anxious, and so kind of felt like hard to reach out to people as well” and she decided to go on a solo trip to *Nara*. She felt better after the trip and she thought she needed to change the scenery at that time. Visits to the Ueno district in Tokyo became a source of solace, emerging as her favourite place during this challenging period. She recalled the difficult months that her mental obstacles started with a very anxious state of mind, and then felt depressed, anxious and lonely in the following month. Although she regretted that she did not reach out to the home university students who travelled with her and her family for help, she expressed that it was impossible to do so with that state of mind. She felt isolated as “maybe I was feeling that I was pushed out from a group, which I didn't, which didn't sit on well with me but, um it wasn't like that at all really”. Eventually, she came out of the situation

and talked to people, “I think I forced myself to get out there to talk to people, to do things, you know, so I just kind of forced myself to do that. I kind of got over that, ah, a mental obstacle I suppose”. Nora later discovered that other SA students had similar experiences, fostering a belief in the importance of openly discussing such challenges. She emphasised the commonality of these downsides among international students and advocated for greater awareness of the mental health aspects of the SA experience.

Towards the end of her sojourn, her dissertation theme for politics emerged. She read an article about a Swedish king visiting the emperor in Japan and she developed her idea from there.

[...] in the journal, I was reading an article about the emperor, and I think the Swedish king was visiting and that kind of I realised, oh, soft power, cultural influence and stuff, that’s the avenue I could go down, so that helped me so much my dissertation. Um I actually, I learned from the government department, that I got the highest grade for the politics dissertation last year. [interview extract]

Discussion

Which particular facets of L2 identity developed?

The primary findings demonstrate that participants experienced significant development in three areas: intercultural competence, national and cultural identities, and academic development. These developments align with and extend previous study on L2 identity in SA contexts.

Mitchell et al. (2013) observed that student sojourners from European countries who had obtained plurilingual and pluricultural identities had high intercultural competencies. For example, Patrick quickly adjusted to the Japanese diet. This can be distinguished from the Irish students in the Pearson-Evans’ study (2006) who took a while to adjust to the Japanese diet and missed Irish food. Notably, Emily seemed to

have developed an intercultural identity by overcoming the challenges of adapting to new cultures (Kim, 2015). Intercultural awareness was evident in Isaac's increased sensitivity to Japanese social issues, fostering a critical understanding of cultural differences.

Although national identity was enhanced for Emily, Patrick and Nora, it did not lead to ethnocentric phenomena as in some cases in previous studies (Pearson-Evans, 2006; Kinginger, 2008; Jackson, 2008). Their national identity emerged when Ireland was misrecognised as other countries, which supports the findings in the Plews' (2015) study.

By contrast, Issac, an Irish student with Nigerian roots, identified more with European identity. At the same time, he found cultural similarities between Japan and his heritage, strengthening his connection to his roots. This unexpected bond suggests a 'sense of betweenness' (Martin and Nakayama, 2008), possibly leading to Kramsch's 'third place' (1998). His experience challenges previous negative narratives about ethnic minority students (Kinger, 2013), highlighting the potential for exploring cultural connections in L2 identity development.

Academic development, a key aspect of L2-related personal competence (Benson et al., 2013), manifested in Nora and Emily finding unexpected inspiration for future studies during SA. Patrick's academic competence thrived in the translation class. Language challenges in non-EMI classes proved satisfactory for participants deviating from the limited benefits of EMI classes (Kubota, 2016; Rose & McKinley, 2017).

What factors facilitated the enhancement of their L2 identity?

Four factors significantly impacted participants' L2 identity development: the advantage of being English L1 speakers, belongingness, psychological challenge, and specific beliefs and interests.

Maximising cultural capital, especially for English native speakers, benefitted Anglophone participants. The participants securing English teaching positions aided integration. Engaging with local students in English or Japanese positively developed intercultural competence. Contrary to Pearson-Evans' (2006) findings, Issac, Nora, and Emily embraced institutionally organised relationships with local students. Patrick's ease in securing jobs contributed to sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. Overall, being English native speakers significantly contributed to positive outcomes in L2 identity development.

Engagement with the local community played a pivotal role in L2 identity development, echoing Umino and Benson's (2016) suggestions. For Issac, Emily, and Patrick, social participation marked the turning point in their SA experiences, involving extensive efforts to reconstruct their identities in the new community. This correlated with a sense of belongingness and acceptance. Issac's active church involvement enhanced not only his faith development (Dinani, 2018) but also his linguistic competence and motivation. Emily labelled herself as an international student sojourner (Mitchell et al., 2017) and transformed her identity within the new community. Patrick heightened cultural awareness and sociolinguistic competence through work. Nora's sense of belonging outside the host university remained unclear, potentially hindered by limited intercultural exposure (Courtois, 2017). Despite Courtois's (2017) critique, three participants actively engaged across age groups and backgrounds.

Nora experienced depression, which she considered a crucial part of her SA experience. She expressed that depression might happen to anyone, and future SA students should be aware of the possibility of it occurring during their sojourn. Despite her struggles, Nora successfully improved her language skills, independence, and intercultural and academic competencies. Reflecting on this experience during the

interview, she appeared to have grown in maturity and became sympathetic with future sojourners.

Emily's non-linguistic self-confidence stemmed from her beauty interests, impacting her self-confidence and intercultural competence. Patrick's interests in food and cooking enhanced his intercultural appreciation. Moreover, Issac's religious faith enhanced both his religious and L2 identity. This underscores personal interests in expanding L2 identity, aligning with Mitchell et al.'s (2017) findings on talents facilitating integration.

Conclusion

This research revealed that the Irish university students' SA experiences in Japan varied depending on individual's interests, beliefs, and backgrounds. The participants enhanced their intercultural competence, national and cultural identities, and academic development. Key factors of L2 identity development included a sense of acceptance and belonging in the local community, leveraging their advantages as English speakers, psychological challenges, and personal beliefs and interests. While some findings aligned with the study of Mitchell et al. (2017), the unique profiles and experiences of the participants provided valuable insights for L2 identity research.

Study limitations included the small participant sample, and most of the data were from retrospective interviews without pre- and in-sojourn data collections. However, this study focused on individual stories, which were conceptualised from the participants' perspectives at the time of the interviews (Barkhuizen, 2015).

This study highlights the need for home universities supporting students' L2 identity development both before and after SA programmes (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Students can prepare by reflecting on their linguistic self-concept, while teachers can foster relationships with host university students. Programme coordinators should provide information on living options, and work placements to help students integrate into the host communities. Post-sojourn debriefing sessions offer reflection and can involve future SA students to construct a supportive community. Despite students' perceived preparedness, they may not anticipate psychological challenges or lack of support structures. Greater collaboration across higher education institutions is recommended, including sharing resources and creating comprehensive support to enhance students' preparation and reintegration experiences. Effective communication and collaboration between students, teachers, and coordinators can mitigate potential challenges, ultimately improving SA outcomes.

Future research should explore the specific mechanisms behind L2 identity development in SA context, examining coping mechanisms for psychological challenges, and investigate L2 identity development among ethnic minority students, particularly as cross-border mobility continues to increase.

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