

## 論文

## 海外経験ある若い日本人男性の人生における英語と 「インターナショナル」のイメージの役割

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### **The Role of English and Images of ‘the International’ in the Lives of Young Japanese Male Sojourners**

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#### **Abstract**

This article analyses interviews with 25 Japanese male returnees who took part in study abroad and/or working holiday maker programs. It examines the ways in which foreign language learning (specifically English) and discourses of ‘the international’ influenced the men’s choices to go abroad. It also analyses how these discourses are connected to interviewees’ lives post sojourn. Prior research about Japanese international sojourners has primarily focused on the experiences of Japanese women and has often portrayed Japanese men as either not interested in international sojourn and language learning, or only interested in these pursuits for instrumental means. The current study, however, concludes that English learning and a desire to be connected to ‘the international’ played a crucial role in participants’ choices to go abroad and remained an important aspect of their identity after their return to Japan. This study not only shows the complexity of the Japanese male experience abroad, but also challenges discourses of study abroad and language learning as a female activity. Lastly, this paper emphasizes interviewees’ lasting emotional connection to English and their English-speaking communities.

#### **概要**

本論文は、留学またはワーキングホリデーの経験がある25人の日本人男性へインタビューし、それを分析するものである。外国語を学ぶことと「インターナショナル」という言説は、どのように海外に行くという選択に影響を与えたか調査する。さらに、海外で生活した後、これらの言説が、参加者の人生にどのような関係があるのか分析する。日本人留学生に関しての先行研究の多くは、日本人女性の経験に焦点を当てており、日本人男性は留学や語学に興味がなく、道具的動機付けにしか興味がないとしばしば述べている。しかし、本論文は、英語を勉強することと「インターナショナル」と関わりたいという願望が、海外に行くという参加者の選択に非常に大きな役割を果たし、帰国してからも彼らのアイデンティティの大切な一部であった。本研究は、日本人男性の海外経験の複雑性を明らかにすることだけではなく、留学と外国語を勉強するのは女性がするものだという言説に異議を唱えている。最後に、インタビューを受けた25人の日本人男性が帰国後も英語や英語のコミュニティと心のつながりを保っているということを強調しておきたい。

## Introduction

Japanese young people have been actively involved in international sojourns for many years, both as study abroad participants and as part of Working Holiday Maker (WHM) programs. The Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS) (2019) estimated over 200,000 Japanese nationals studied abroad in 2018 with 74% of their locations being in what Krachu (1985) terms “Inner Circle” countries - countries where English is the predominant first language of its residents. For Japanese youth, language study is a noteworthy activity for both study abroad participants and WHMers, and at times the lines between the two pursuits becomes blurred (Ota & Hoshino, 2016).

Although females take part more frequently in international sojourns globally (Kinging, 2009), this gap is particularly noticeable among Japanese youth. Japanese data from both study abroad and WHM programs exhibit a significantly higher number of female involvement. In fact, these numbers have been estimated to be as high as 80% female participation for both study abroad and WHM programs (JAOS, 2016; Kobayashi, 2018). Research in second language acquisition (SLA), education, sociology, and anthropology has also primarily focused on the narratives of Japanese women in relation to international experience. Studies have explored topics such as the historical trends of Japanese women’s ventures abroad (Gildart, 2014), Japanese working women’s sojourn reasons and goals (Kobayashi, 2007), Japanese women’s international experiences as human capital (Ono & Piper, 2004) and Japanese female’s enactments of agency in graduate programs abroad (Morita, 2004). Other research has shifted its focus to the romantic lives and desires of Japanese women abroad (e.g., Hamano, 2019; Kelsky, 2001a; 2001b; Takahashi, 2013).

Kato (2007; 2015) and Kitano (2020) note this abundance of research about the international experiences of Japanese women has led to largely

overlooking Japanese male sojourner stories. Kato (2015) argues that neglecting the experiences of Japanese men abroad has two potential risks:

First, it may problematize both the act of migration and women as something unusual, and intensify the stereotype of women as socially problematic compared to men. Second, it leads to a monolithic depiction of men as if they were all equally content with Japanese society. (p. 222)

Moreover, continuing to focus on study abroad and foreign language studies as something unique to women solidifies the essentialist discourse that the pursuit of languages and cultural studies are more inherently ‘feminine’. The current study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the narratives of Japanese male returnees in relation to English and discourses of ‘the international’. With this study, I use the term ‘the international’ to represent discursively constructed images of life, people and culture, outside of Japan. At times ‘the international’ may take place within Japan, but according to participants, it is still distinctly different from ‘Japan’ and things ‘Japanese’. The data in this article was originally from a larger study that investigated discourses of gender, masculinity, and desire in Japanese men’s international narratives.

## Study Background

### *Study abroad and the Japanese context*

Kinging’s (2009) comprehensive review of study abroad research revealed that study abroad is viewed around the world by students, teachers and educational administrators as a time of exponential personal growth and knowledge acquisition. In the case of Japan, similar discourses surrounding study abroad are reflected on both micro (personal) and macro (national) levels. Study abroad is considered to be the ideal way to

develop foreign language skills, intercultural competence and meaningful intercultural relationships (Takahashi, 2013; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Tsuneyoshi, 2005). Universities and political policy further frame these skills as advantageous in the search to find employment in an increasingly competitive market (Kubota, 2016).

On the macro level, study abroad is frequently connected to the broad discourse of the internationalization of Japanese universities and to a steadily 'globalizing Japan'. This relationship is apparent in the advertisement of study abroad programs at Japanese universities (Kobayashi, 2018) and within political policy of the Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture, Technology (MEXT). For instance, one of the chief goals of MEXT's 2013 Japan Revitalization project is to "strengthen [en] human resource capabilities from global operation activities" (p. 52) by sending 120,000 Japanese students abroad annually by 2020. Once returnees enter the domestic workforce, the skills and knowledge obtained abroad are expected to contribute to Japan as a nation by increasing its competitiveness on the world stage.

Also essential to the macro discourse of study abroad in Japan is the idea of foreign language acquisition, specifically, the acquisition of English (Burgess, 2015; Kobayashi, 2018). English's growing reputation as the international language of science, technology, business and tourism has strengthened the idea that using English domestically assists Japan internationally (Kubota, 2016; Yamagami & Tollefson, 2009). English itself is seen as a tool for internationalizing Japan, a concept that Tsuneyoshi (2005) terms "Englishization as Internationalization" (p. 68). English obtainment and use through international sojourns are thus inherent in both political and educational policy concerned with ideas of modernity and economic progress in Japan.

### **Neoliberal discourses within study abroad**

The promotion of foreign language

competencies and intercultural communication skills for future employment and globalization of the nation state have been linked to the growing trend of neoliberalism by several scholars (e.g., Kubota, 2016; Lee, 2016; Song, 2018). For instance, Kubota (2016), who summarizes neoliberalism as "privatisation, marketization and branding as well as an emphasis on human capital development and lifelong learning, all of which aim to increase a competitive edge nationally, institutionally and personally in the capitalist knowledge economy" (p. 348), locates the discourses surrounding study abroad within a neoliberal social imaginary that aims to cultivate "neoliberal subjects" that are "equipped with communication skills, a global mindset, and intercultural competence and thus as competitive in global labour marketplaces" (p. 348-349). From this neoliberal perspective, foreign language skills can be seen as a form of capital (Park, 2018). Viewing the possible benefits of study abroad from this perspective international sojourns not only an act of self-fulfillment or initiator of multiculturalism, but also as a component of a capitalist system that promotes continual self-improvement and the maximization of profits (Park, 2018).

### ***Gendered images of international sojourns and language studies***

Study abroad, WHM programs and foreign language learning have been dominantly constructed as female pursuits in Japan. Kobayashi's 2002 survey of 555 Japanese high school students attitudes towards English learning and images associated with English concluded that female students had significantly more positive perceptions of English learning and stronger desires to use English in future careers. Kobayashi argues that gendered academic practices socialize students into traditional male/female domains. Upon revisiting this 2002 study in her 2018 book, Kobayashi again examines the ways that universities in Japan promote their language and

study abroad programs as a method for (mainly female) students to thrive in international domains that are far from “the male-dominated Japanese business world.” (p. 54).

Kobayashi (2018) also suggests that, regardless of the persistent promotion of English as a tool of domestic internationalization in Japan, the actual hiring practices of corporate Japan rarely necessitate fluency in English, creating “a sense of ‘why bother to study English’ in Japanese male students” (p. 67). This proposal is supported by her interviews with administrators at private Canadian English schools, who frequently commented that Japanese male students lacked motivation and focus in their language studies in comparison to their female counterparts. Moreover, Takahashi’s (2013) initial interviews with men in her study of Japanese sojourners in Australian universities concluded that “[m]ale students were more or less straightforward and practical” (p. 1) in their reasons for going abroad (all of which were related to education and career). Her female respondents, however, had “colourful” (p. 1) reasons and stories to share. Takahashi’s examination of her female participants’ connections to English and Australian life is analysed in relation to discourses of *akogare* (yearning or desire) for native English speakers as friends and romantic partners. Other scholars have also framed *akogare* as Japanese female desire for the discursively constructed West and the English language (e.g., Bailey, 2007; Kelsky, 2001a; 2001b).

Kato (2015), Ono (2015) and Suzuki (2015) are some of the few studies that provide detailed analysis of the narratives of Japanese men abroad. These three studies highlight how masculine corporate culture in Japan both privileges and represses Japanese men by bestowing status upon them should they fit into a very narrow definition of ‘the successful adult male’. Participants frequently used their international sojourns as a form of resistance to this image of Japanese hegemonic corporate masculinity. However, there

has been little research that examines the experiences of Japanese men abroad outside of their sojourn in connection to domestic work in Japan. Therefore, the current study will examine data from interview accounts of young Japanese men who studied or temporarily worked abroad from a different perspective. Specifically, this study analyses what place English and images of ‘the international’ have in their lives both before and after their sojourn. Data is presented in two stages. First, participants’ goals for going abroad are discussed and the importance of language studies is highlighted. Next, participants’ previous and current occupations are viewed in relation to English use and interaction with ‘the international’. Overall, this article argues that for most of the men in this study, improving their English was their main motivation to leave Japan and also consumed much of their time abroad. Moreover, a significant number of the men interviewed retained a keen interest in English and English use after their return to Japan, regardless of their careers. In doing so, these men both oppose the discourse of international sojourns and language study as ‘feminine’ and also challenge some of the neoliberal discourses that surround study abroad.

## Research Design

### Participants

This article is based on data derived from interviews with 25 Japanese men who had previously participated in work or study programs overseas. Interviewee sojourns lasted from one month to five years, and participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 36 years old. Participants went abroad as exchange students, international students, language school students, WHMs, volunteers and company workers. Every participant took part in intensive language studies overseas at some point in his sojourn.

Participants visited 11 countries in total. However, nine participants visited more than one

country over multiple sojourns. 23 of the 25 men interviewed spent time at some point in Inner Circle countries (Canada, UK, Australia, USA). A notable similarity among most participants is their level of education and social class. Study abroad is predominantly an activity of middleclass university educated youth (Goldoni, 2017; Kinginger, 2009; Kubota, 2016), as is participation in WHM programs (Kawashiyama, 2010). Likewise, the men in this study generally had the financial means to go abroad as students or through WHM programs. In this study, 24 of the 25 respondents were university educated. Only one man (Junpei) joined the workforce immediately after graduating from high school. A comprehensive chart of participant profiles can be found in the beginning of the Findings section of this article.

### Data Collection

The data analysed in this study was derived primarily through bilingual (Japanese and English), semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interviews averaged 1.5 hours in length and took place in a public space such as university cafeterias or cafes. While interviews were frequently informal and conversational, I fashioned my questions after what Galletta and Cross (2013) describe as “both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions” (p. 45) in order to learn generally about participant experiences and perceptions while also situating our conversation in the context of international sojourns from a gendered perspective. This approach necessitated that I sometimes specifically inquire about topics of research interest.

Following the research interviews and initial

data analysis, I conducted brief member checking interviews over email, SNS or in person. Member checking served to both fill in interview gaps and receive feedback on my initial findings (Roulston, 2011). Document analysis was also used to triangulate interview and member checking data.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data and inspect both difference and similarities across participant interviews. Following Braun and Clark’s (2006, see p. 87) approach, data analysis took place in six stages: (1) familiarization of data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) creation of themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and finally, (6) creation of the final report. Aryes (2008) notes that because codes and themes simultaneously inform each other, thematic analysis is not a linear procedure but instead a cyclical process that involves referring back to data and refining analysis. For purpose of this specific article, I reviewed data again regarding participants’ connection to English and images of ‘the international’ in their lives before, during, and after their sojourns.

## Findings

I present overviews of the data in this paper through charts summarizing findings in regards to the role of English and ‘the international’ in participant accounts. Each participant has a number before their pseudonym, and when referring to more than three participants, numbers are used instead of names for the sake of brevity.

**Table 1 Overview of participant information and sojourn goals**

Name and visa type	Age at interview	Location abroad	Year(s) abroad	Time abroad	Personal sojourn goal(s)	Main activities abroad
1. <i>Akihiro</i> Student	34	New York (USA), Singapore	2008	2 weeks, 2 weeks	English study for fun, socialize with host community	English study, socializing with classmates

2. <i>Dai</i> WHM	31	Vancouver (CAN)	2015-2016	1 year	Make new friends, make films abroad	English study, attending language exchanges
3. <i>Fumiya</i> Student	20	Jakarta (Indonesia)	2017	5 months	English study for career	University studies, exploring campus life
4. <i>Gen</i> Student, WHM	27	Cebu (Philippines), Kelowna (CAN)	2016-2017	6 months, 13 months	English study for teaching career	Develop English to be an English teacher in future
5. <i>Haruki</i> WHM	21	Vancouver (CAN)	2016-2017	10 months	English study for career	English study, socializing with classmates
6. <i>Hikaru</i> WHM	27	Vancouver, Canmore (CAN)	2015-2016	6 months, 6 months	English study for fun/ try a completely new job abroad	English study, working at restaurants
7. <i>Jin</i> Student	24	Adelaide (AUS) Gurgaon (India)	2016	2 months, 8 months	English study for career/ IT study for career	Studying and socializing with housemates
8. <i>Junpei</i> Student	27	New York (USA)	2010	1 month	Make non-Japanese friends, communicate in English and see New York	Partying, traveling
9. <i>Kazu</i> Student	28	San Diego, Northridge (USA)	2010-2011, 2017-2018	6 months, 1 year	English study for career/ accounting degree to work in USA	Studies
10. <i>Masato</i> Student	25	Frankfurt (GER)	2016	10 months	German study for MA degree	University classes, travel
11. <i>Natsuki</i> Student	25	London (UK), Hamilton (CAN)	2013, 2013-2014	5 weeks, 8 months	English studies for teaching career	University classes, soccer club
12. <i>Nobu</i> Student	19	Seattle (USA)	2016-2018	3 years	Develop English fluency, experience American youth culture	Intense studies, socializing
13. <i>Nori</i> Student	28	Växjö (Sweden), London (UK)	2012-2013, 2014-2015	10 months, 1 year	Develop English fluency/ education studies for degree	University studies, socializing
14. <i>Ryoma</i> Student, Work	36	San Francisco (USA), Bangkok (Thailand)	2009-2012, 2015-2017	3 years, 25 months	Work transfer/ Thai language studies for degree	Work/learning Thai, teaching Japanese to secondary students
15. <i>Ryota</i> Student	24	Vancouver (CAN)	2014-2015	10 months	English study for degree, make non- Japanese friends	University studies, socializing
16. <i>Ryuhei</i> Student	24	Vancouver (CAN)	2014-2015	8 months	Desire to challenge himself in new place	University studies, church group
17. <i>Seiya</i> Student	28	Toronto (CAN)	2011-2012	7 months	English study for fun, make non-Japanese friends	English studies, traveling



18. <i>Shoma</i> Tourist, WHM	22	Melbourne (AUS), Vancouver (CAN)	2015, 2017	1 month, 2 months	Seeing the world, meeting new people	Volunteering with local environmental group, internship at language school
19. <i>Shinya</i> Student	24	Vancouver (CAN)	2014-2016	2 years	English study for degree, make non- Japanese friends	University studies, socializing
20. <i>Takeo</i> WHM, Work	31	Vancouver (CAN)	2014-2016, 2018	2 years, 6 months	English studies for fun, learn about gardening in Canada	English studies, full- time job landscaping
21. <i>Tani</i> Student	28	Seattle, Davis (USA)	2010-2011	1 year, 6 months	Study English for fun, learn about organic agriculture	Volunteering on farm, English study
22. <i>Tom</i> Student	21	Edmonton (CAN)	2016-2017	8 months	English studies for teaching career	University studies, socializing
23. <i>Wataru</i> Student, WHM	31	Vancouver (CAN), London (UK)	2013-2015, 2015-2017	2 years, 1.5 years	English studies to communicate with non-Japanese people, experiencing a foreign culture	English studies, working at investment company
24. <i>Yoshi</i> Student, WHM	27	Cebu (Philippines), Sydney, Tasmania (AUS), Gurgaon (India)	2013, 2014, 2016	10 months, 10 months, 2 months, 2 months	English studies for fun, experience working in a new country	English studies, working in a hotel, volunteering on farm
25. <i>Yu</i> WHM	28	Sydney (AUS)	2015	1 year	English studies for career, experience working in a cafe	English studies, working part-time in a café

### **English's connection to participant sojourns**

At the beginning of each research interview, I asked participants to explain their decision to study or work abroad and to briefly tell me about their daily life overseas. Interview data suggested that language studies were significant in decisions to go abroad and were influential in the men's day-to-day lives. 21 of the 25 interviewees gave language learning as a main reason for their sojourn and 19 of these men specified English as their language of study. Only Ryoma and Masato, who studied Thai and German respectively, were majoring in these languages in their Japanese universities and connected their fluency in these languages directly to graduation.

Eight interviewees justified their English studies abroad as directly connected to their future career (3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 22, 25). However, Haruki

and Kazu hoped that their careers would be outside of Japan (in Canada or Australia for Haruki, and in the USA for Kazu). English was also important for Tom, Gen and Natsuki, all of whom had interests in becoming English teachers at the time of their interviews. The remaining participants had rather ambiguous views of how English would benefit their occupations but all men hoped to somehow have a career connected to 'the international' ("国際と関係ある仕事") or a career that connected them with "non-Japanese people" ("外国人と関わりの仕事"). For these three men, English appeared to be a form of capital that would increase their competitiveness in 'globalizing' Japan.

In contrast, not all participants justified their English studies abroad in association to a career. Some participants (1, 6, 12, 17, 20, 21, 24) expressed

ambivalent desires to learn English. Their interest in English was mainly connected to an attraction to Anglophone pop culture or because “speaking English was fun” (“英語を喋るのは楽しかった”). Other participants claimed to simply “love English”. For instance, when explaining his choice to go abroad, Nobu excitedly exclaimed, “I love English!”, whereas Yoshi simply stated, “すごい英語好きだったから昔からね” (“because I have really loved English from a long time ago”).

Four participants (8, 15, 17, 23) were primarily drawn abroad by their desire to socialize in English with non-Japanese people. English was viewed as a lingua franca to use with both host community members and other international students. Each of these interviewees described what could be seen as an *akogare* for interaction with foreign cultures and people through English before their study abroad. For instance, Wataru shared the moment he knew he wanted to learn English abroad through his description of an encounter he had in downtown Tokyo when he came upon a group of foreign residents offering “free hugs”:

Free hugs の sign 持ってて。ハグって文化も日本にないから最初は驚いたなあ。それ以上に知らない人同士なのにこんな、こんなに笑顔になる事に感動したよ。

*They were holding a sign saying free hugs.*

*There's no hug culture in Japan so at first I was surprised. Beyond that, even though they were people I didn't know, they smiled so much. For them to smile so much, I was moved.*

For Wataru, English offered an avenue into an attractive world that he viewed as very different from Japanese culture. Kubota (2011) notes how language learning is not always connected to academic or instrumental means, but instead may act as a “social space for enjoyment” (p. 475). An interest in cultivating diverse friendships overseas was the driving force in these four participants' sojourns. Correspondingly, participants in the current study present diverse reasons for their interest in language studies that include socializing, enjoyment, and future careers.

#### **English and ‘the international’ post-sojourn**

Considering that English and an interest in foreign cultures and friendships were significant reasons for most participants' sojourns, I was curious what role English and images of ‘the international’ played in participants' lives since their return to Japan. In other words, did their attraction to English remain in their lives post sojourn? The chart below summarizes this data by giving pre and post sojourn occupations, and current occupations (as of August 2020).

**Table 2 Overview of participant occupations pre sojourn, post sojourn, and current occupation (August 2020).**

Name	Pre-sojourn occupation	Post-sojourn occupation	Current occupation	Name	Pre-sojourn occupation	Post-sojourn occupation	Current occupation
1. <i>Akihiro</i>	University student	University student	Accountant	14. <i>Ryoma</i>	Company worker/ university student	Language teacher/ university student	Owner of language school
2. <i>Dai</i>	Filmmaker	Filmmaker	Filmmaker and small business owner	15. <i>Ryota</i>	University student	University student	Salesperson
3. <i>Fumiya</i>	University student	University student	Manufacturing company employee	16. <i>Ryuhei</i>	University student	University student	Student



4. <i>Gen</i>	Company worker (sales)	Guest house manager	JICA volunteer	17. <i>Seiya</i>	Company worker (advertising)	Game industry (start up)	IT worker
5. <i>Haruki</i>	University student	University student	Salesperson	18. <i>Shoma</i>	University student	University student	Salesperson
6. <i>Hikaru</i>	Company worker (sales)	Study abroad agent	Study abroad agent (recently quit)	19. <i>Shinya</i>	University student	University student	Salesperson
7. <i>Jin</i>	Company worker (sales)	Recruitment company worker	Recruitment company worker	20. <i>Takeo</i>	Professional gardener	Professional gardener	Professional gardener
8. <i>Junpei</i>	Factory worker	Bartender	Bartender	21. <i>Tani</i>	University student	University student	Manager at educational materials and English teacher recruitment company
9. <i>Kazu</i>	Accountant	Accountant	Accountant (in New York)	22. <i>Tom</i>	University student	University student	English teacher (junior high)
10. <i>Masato</i>	Graduate student	Graduate student	Public servant (city hall)	23. <i>Wataru</i>	Engineer	Customer support in investment company	Customer support in investment company
11. <i>Natsuki</i>	University student	University student	Salesperson	24. <i>Yoshi</i>	University student (recent graduate)	Guest house manager	Guest house manager
12. <i>Nobu</i>	High school student	University student	University student	25. <i>Yu</i>	Property rental agent	Company worker (sales)	Salesperson
13. <i>Nori</i>	University/grad student	University/grad student	PhD student, Japanese tutor				

### **Foreign language use and interaction with ‘the international’ through occupations**

As I mentioned in the previous section, eight interviewees (3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 22, 25) connected English acquisition abroad to desires for a future career in an ‘international’ field or abroad. Among these eight participants, four men - Fumiya, a manufacturing plant employee, Gen, JICA volunteer, Kazu, an accountant in the USA, and Tom, a junior high school English teacher - have chances to use English or interact with non-Japanese people on a regular basis in their current occupations (it is important to note that Natsuki actively chose not to pursue a job in English language teaching despite receiving his teaching license and instead chose a career in domestic sales). Remaining

interviewees who did not use English or interact with non-Japanese people through their jobs did not seem particularly disappointed, however. Instead they pursued English and multicultural friendships through other means, such as through self-study or joining local internationally focused events that bring together Japanese nationals and foreign residents.

Interestingly, eight participants (2, 6, 8, 13, 14, 21, 23, 24) who did not explicitly connect their sojourns to English use or interactions with non-Japanese people in their future workplaces now have jobs that necessitate foreign language use or connections to ‘the international’ somehow. Examples include collaborating with filmmakers abroad (Dai), working at a bar in a tourist hub

(Junpei), owning and managing a language school (Ryoma), and hiring and training foreign English teachers (Tani). Hikaru, who recently left his job as a study abroad agent, gave this reply to my question of “can you tell me a little bit about how you use English now?”

*English is very important for me and I have used it very frequently. My previous job was study abroad agent. As an education consultant I was required to communicate with schools in the world.*

In a later comment, he highlighted the social side of his language use:

*Also I still use English with friends from South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil. Anywhere.*

Nori, who is currently collecting data for his PhD in Sweden, expressed how his relationship with English has changed overtime:

*English is always a ‘foreign’ language for me, but the more and longer I use English, the less foreign it looks and sounds indeed. Honestly, I can’t see English as a totally foreign language any more and it’s just the second language for me now.*

Dai and Tani gave similar responses about the role English plays in their lives today. For these three participants, English may no longer be part of ‘the international’ but instead is now an integral part of their identities.

Overall, aspirations for language learning and use (primarily English) were not only the prime reason for most interviewees’ sojourns, but they also remained an important aspect of many men’s lives post sojourn. Language use was sometimes linked with maintaining a relationship with ‘the international’, largely through interactions with non-Japanese residents, tourists, or friends in other

countries. Another noteworthy finding is how many participants ultimately took jobs that involved foreign language skills despite originally going abroad with more ambivalent goals for language acquisition.

## Discussion

Analysis interviewee accounts demonstrate the value that the majority of participants place on language learning and multicultural interactions. Developing fluency in English and associating with Anglophone culture appeared particularly inspirational among participants, so much so that several men continued language studies and interactions with ‘the international’ post-sojourn. Moreover, some interviewees displayed a sort of *akogare* for English or Anglophone culture - for instance, Wataru’s desire to join the “free hug” culture and Nobu’s exclamation of “I love English!”. These men’s desires support Kitano’s (2020) and Kubota’s (2011) proposal that *akogare* is not simply a Japanese female phenomenon but can be used as a tool to assess desire in language learning “regardless of the gender or race of parties involved” (Kubota, 2011, p. 484).

Lave and Wegner (1991) argue that learning is not only a cognitive process but also inherently social. To explore the social side of language learning, some SLA scholars have adapted Anderson’s (1983) concept of Imagined Communities where Anderson contends that the nation state is an abstract concept constructed by the people’s collective imagination. Members of a nation are joined together through their imaginations, despite only ever having actually met a tiny fraction of their compatriots. Likewise, Kanno and Norton (2003) note that within language learning, “imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (p. 241). Learners orient their studies and actions in ways that connect them with their target language

community. Moreover, their desire to one day join these communities can greatly impact their investment in a language (Kanno, 2002). In fact, Kanno and Norton (2003) argue that imagined communities can be just as influential as the communities that learners interact with in-person.

The pursuit of a foreign language is therefore, for some, a deeply emotional process connected to relationships with others (real or imagined) that has the potential to sustain learning (Pavelescu & Petrić, 2018) and form meaningful language mediated identities (Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011). English and multicultural interactions appear to be critical aspects of the pre-sojourn and post-sojourn identity of several participants, suggesting why they continued to pursue language learning and ‘the international’ even when their careers did not require it. The actions of these participants were not merely motivation to learn but fundamental to the person they wanted to be upon their return to Japan.

Analysis of participant interviews provides further insights that compliment previous studies about the experiences of Japanese male sojourners and Japanese male English learners. Specifically, by examining the place of English and ‘the international’ in participant accounts, this study provides depth to the rather limited portrayal of Japanese men who take part in study abroad and WHM programs. While some interviewees in this study did see English through neoliberal terms to help them acquire employment in a globalizing Japan, neoliberal motivations did not appear to prompt most participant sojourns. Instead of using language as capital in the workforce, the majority of interviewees viewed English study as a hobby or a tool to make multicultural connections. The findings from this study can add nuance to the observations of Takahashi (2013), who noted that her Japanese male participants seemed only interested in studying English in Australia for the purpose of their future careers. Moreover, participants’ continued passion for English studies,

even as a hobby, contradict the attitude of ‘why bother to study English’ introduced by Kobayashi’s (2018) interviewees.

## Conclusion

The present study first gave a descriptive presentation of the international narratives of 25 Japanese men before examining interview data on a deeper level by considering what role language acquisition and ‘the international’ played in the lives of interviewees. Although multiple motivations for going abroad were identified, English language learning was the main motivator for most men to go abroad. It also consumed much of their sojourn life. English had different meanings for different participants; for some, English was a tool to join a competitive and globalizing domestic workforce, while for others, English studies were a hobby that connected them to Anglophone pop culture. This study also highlighted the communal nature of foreign languages given that many participants saw English as a path to diverse friendship groups.

A noteworthy finding from this study is the importance of English and multicultural interactions post-sojourn for numerous participants. Several participants used English and interacted with non-Japanese customers or coworkers regularly in their workplaces. For other men, English was not necessary in their careers and yet they continued self-study and looking for avenues to expand their international friendship groups. Clearly, English and ‘the international’ extended outside of the neoliberal discourses of lifelong learning and employment within a globalizing market.

This study challenges the static notions of Japanese male sojourners by highlighting the emotional connection many had with languages and foreign cultures and how this connection appeared integral to their identities upon their return to Japan. Moreover, by understanding more about the Japanese male experience overseas, this

study contradicts essentialist perceptions of Japanese women as the only possessors of *akogare* for foreign languages, multicultural friendships, and life abroad.

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