

# Japan meets England: Socialization into a new academic discourse community

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## Abstract

*Students who study abroad are almost always better prepared to operate in the target language than those who do not. This paper investigates the experiences of one Japanese female university student who studied abroad in England in an intensive English program for a summer. The paper focuses on the participant's perceived similarities and differences between studying in England and Japan and analyzes these experiences through the lens of Language Socialization (Ochs, 2001). The paper finds that the participant's socialization was a partial success, and reasons for this are discussed.*

## Introduction:

In recent years, the relative internationalization of communication technology, media, visual arts, pop-culture, and other forms of communicative interaction and expression has done much to foster and promote an interest in living and studying abroad for extended periods of time. Individuals who engage in such activities are the bearers of certain sociocultural notions that they have acquired from various processes of socialization, and are often times entering into the periphery of new cultural zones wherein said notions can be challenged or come into conflict with a different set of accepted cultural practices.

One such person is Mayuko Kurobe<sup>1</sup>, a female Japanese international student<sup>2</sup> who

studied abroad in an intensive summer English program and one academic semester in England. The information and quotations presented about her in this paper come from an interview<sup>3</sup> that I conducted with her over the Internet via a computer program called Skype. The interview lasted approximately thirty-three minutes, and took place on the sixth of April, 2012. Using language socialization as defined by Elinor Ochs (2001) as a theoretical foundation, this paper will address the perceived similarities and differences between the academic ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991 as cited in Morita, 2004) that Mayuko experienced in both Japan and England, and will follow up with a discussion of how successful her socialization into her new academic community was. That is, how successful she was in terms of her intended transition and transformation from ‘legitimate peripheral participant’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991 as cited in Morita, 2004) to fuller membership in England. What directly follows is an exposition about the participant’s background as well as a general picture of what she experienced on a typical day.

Mayuko began studying English as a second language when she was eleven years old, but felt that her up-to-now ten years of education did not adequately expose her to the spoken language and focused too heavily on grammar, reading, and writing. Her major being English, she explained that her studies in Japan focused primarily on “how to write, how to read, how, like, how grammars work in the sentence. And sometimes I learn business English, like, um – I dunno – how to write English letters, emails, I mean – so – And yeah, a little bit culture, but grammar as well for British and American.” It was because she wanted to further develop her listening and speaking skills that Mayuko first decided to study abroad, and her school allowed her to choose where she would like to study. She chose England because she had never been there before, and because she had some British teachers at her university in Japan whose way of speaking, being different from her education primarily in American English, “fascinated” her.

After she moved to England and began her studies, Mayuko's typical daily schedule consisted of getting up in the morning, going to school to attend several classes, and then heading to the library to eat, complete homework assignments and essays, and finally going to socialize with friends. Suffice it to say that much of Mayuko's daily life experience seemed to be dominated by schoolwork, a fact that will be discussed in more detail later: "Sometime I just staying library so long time, because I don't do homework in my home, so [xx] I do homework in the library."

### **Similarities and Differences: Crossing the Divide**

If one takes a moment to envision the macro- or micro- 'cultures' associated with Japan and England, two very different pictures will emerge. Mayuko, when asked about the similarities and differences between her experiences, felt that it was much easier to discuss the differences. Foremost among the differences she mentioned were the people. In England, she encountered a greater variety of nationalities, and people just seemed "friendly" and "talkative", traits she felt were common to people both inside and outside the classroom. Conversely, she characterized Japanese society and classrooms as "conservative"; "Because even we sitting next, you don't talk at all. We don't say 'hi.'" In Japan, she claimed that her classmates would construct her as having an awkward, deviant personality if she were to speak up in class or ask questions. As the interview progressed, she revealed that she preferred the British academic community's discourse practice of oral discussion on the part of students, and willingly accepted that this was a part of her socialization without resistance. In other words, if it were acceptable and expected in Japan to verbally participate in classrooms, Mayuko would embrace it. For Mayuko, the transformation from playing the part of a "conservative" Japanese student to an active, vocal classroom participant was not difficult.

**Excerpt 1:**

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Mayuko: “Otherwise I don’t understand anything and I will forget soon, so I tried to speak a lot. [...] So I don’t do that in Japan, but in London I could really well.”

Interviewer: “How did you feel about the changes that happened?”

Mayuko: “Um + basically, I like to speak in the classes even in Japan, but I didn’t actually, but many people in Japan talk to me: ‘if you go to England or somewhere abroad and study there, you have to speak a lot, a lot in classes,’ so I was ready to do that, so [laughs], it’s not difficult for me to adjust.”

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She also felt stark differences in the quality and quantity of academic assignments that she received in Japan and those that she was required to do in England. In Japan, she was never required to search for and employ academic sources in her essays, and never had to write essays longer than a couple of pages.

**Excerpt 2:**

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Mayuko: But for me, for 24 opening libraries were fantastic. It was really helpful for me to write essays or something. [...] We have lots of assignments, I think. In England. In Japan, I have actually + I have assignments, but I haven’t written essays like over 400 words. And we didn’t use quotes anything, like sources or something.

Interviewer: “Really? No sources? Okay.”

Mayuko: “No, even when write in English.”

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While the purpose of the above excerpt is to illustrate Mayuko's encounter with a different quality and quantity of homework assignments, it is also interesting to note Mayuko's response to my confirmation question about not having had to use sources in Japan. Her last line, using the word 'even', seems to indicate her surprise at having not been told to use sources when writing English papers in Japan. To put it another way, as a result of being required to use sources in England, she came to associate using sources with writing in English, and therefore may be implicitly revealing her own particular ideology of the two languages in question; English is construed as an academic language, and Japanese is not.

As excerpt 3 below shows, another large difference Mayuko felt was the difficulty of living on her own and bearing the responsibilities that accompany it.

**Excerpt 3:**

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Mayuko: "Well, it was really hard because I di- did everything by myself, even like deciding house, and ++ almost everything. Not only school life, it was hard for me to survive in England as well. I've never looking at + looking at the houses. So + and I- I'm living with my parents, yeah, so it was hard for me."

Interviewer: "So the most memorable thing is that it was really difficult?"

Mayuko: "Yes. And I lost my bed, like + at first, like ++ [xx] very beginning, I was looking for the house? So, I didn't have any room to sleep. [xx] So, I'm staying youth hostel, and so + one day I lost my place to sleep because there was a floor reservation already, so I got some type of homeless."

Interviewer: "Oh, really? So you had a rough time every once in a while?"

Mayuko: “Yeah! [laughs]”

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Mayuko’s newfound independence may have also had an empowering effect on her own self-constructed identity as a motivated and successful student. She went on to recommend study abroad only to those who have similar motivation to study and an ability to contend with daily life in an independent and responsible fashion. Mayuko’s motivation as a function of her socialization is elaborated upon in the following section.

In sum, Mayuko felt that there were mostly differences between Japanese and English schools and societies, and this is evident not only from the interview excerpts above, but also the fact that she eschewed the opportunity to discuss similarities. I will now move on to discuss the factors that helped and hindered her socialization into her English academic discourse community.

### **Participation: Support, Motivation, Linguistic Awareness, and Workload**

Throughout the interview, Mayuko revealed several things about her study abroad experience that helped to ease and promote her transformation from ‘newcomer’ to ‘legitimate peripheral participant’ (LPP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991 as cited in Morita, 2004). Among these were her self-identification as a motivated study abroad student, the support of her ESL teachers, advice that she received from a student already studying abroad in England, and her completion of an intensive summer ESL course. Each of these aspects of Mayuko’s socialization will be discussed and elaborated upon in turn.

Before Mayuko embarked on her journey to England, she attempted to inform herself about many of the cultural differences that she would encounter. Friends and tutors at her Japanese university explained to her that she would need to ‘talk a lot’ in order to be seen as a competent student in England (see Excerpt 1). Additionally, Mayuko

explained that one of her friends had already gone to England to study at Oxford before her own departure date. She was able to consult with this individual through non face-to-face communication (e.g. e-mail) concerning any questions that she had regarding the language, cultures, or practices that she would encounter in England.

#### **Excerpt 4**

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Mayuko: “One of my friends? She was studying in Oxford, so, before? Before my going to England, I ask her some advice. Like how to get money from Japan, how to search houses, and how was the classes, how to deal with people in there, so + it was helpful for me ++ to ask her advice.”

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Motivation was an influential component in Mayuko’s socialization. Despite her academic major being English language, she was not required by her school in Japan to study abroad. In other words, Mayuko made a conscious choice from the outset that she would like to enter into a culture and linguistic environment different from her own in order to account for her perceived deficiencies in English oral and aural modalities, and to learn more about British culture and language.

#### **Excerpt 5**

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Mayuko: And + some Chinese people are forced to come and study in England by their parents. And, yeah + so, some Chinese student, they didn’t have any motivation to study, and one of them? They get back home, because they didn’t want to study anymore, so, yeah, I felt the difference of the motivation between me and them.”

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Interestingly enough, Excerpt 5 may reveal something slightly more profound about

Mayuko's self-identified motivation. It is not only that Mayuko considered herself to be a motivated study abroad student, but that this very motivation might have been reinforced by her experiences of other international students' shortcomings or failures. Furthermore, when asked whether she would recommend study abroad to other people, her response was as follows:

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### **Excerpt 6**

Mayuko: "Because it was helpful for me, but um + yeah. I learned lots of things in England, so I would like to recommend, but + it depends on the people, because some people + [xx] just living in here and playing around. And they don't study. Yeah yeah, if they had motivation to study in there, they can be a very good, they can have very good experience, but it depends [laughs]."

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Clearly, motivation played a predominant role in assisting in Mayuko's socialization by fueling the creation of a cognitive space wherein she could examine, accept, or reject new 'ways of being' (Gee, 1996 as cited in Curdt-Christiansen, 2008).

Not only motivation, but also other factors were at play concerning her development of linguistic awareness. After arriving in England in the summer of 2011, Mayuko was enrolled in an intensive ESL course that she perceived as having been vital to her later success in undergraduate schoolwork. The course consisted of writing, conversation, presentations, and reading skills development.

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### **Excerpt 7**

Mayuko: "If I didn't take English classes during the summer, I think I couldn't understand anything after [xx] after that ++ undergraduate course, so it was a very, very



helpful for me to taking ESL course before taking basic classes. [...] I wrote a lot of essays? More than, um, undergraduate course actually, in the ESL class.”

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Her major being English language notwithstanding, she nevertheless felt that the summer course was helpful in preparing her linguistically for her later courses.

Language socialization is both a dynamic and continual process. Even after the summer intensive ESL course ended and she became formally enrolled at the English university during the fall semester, 2011, her teachers continued to offer both curricular and extra-curricular support to her. Mayuko’s perception of her teachers was that they understood her position as an individual on the periphery of English academic and social culture. This is a fact that, if indeed true, is no doubt a result of the teachers’ own socialization by the experience of having had prior study abroad students in their classes, and perhaps having to help them adjust, thereby positioning themselves as something akin to ‘knowledgeable cultural consultants for international students.’

### **Excerpt 8**

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Mayuko: “I ++ I really like them. Especially my ESL course teachers, because they gave me lots of really nice advice. Not only English ++ like, assignments, but they gave me like how to deal with in the different countries society, like community. And, and they know how hard to live there. Like, the different, not ++ native countries. We sometimes talked about that. Like, when I feel stressed to live in [xx] So, yeah. It was very helpful.”

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Mayuko also stated that she had no background knowledge in an undergraduate business course for which she enrolled, but with the help and assistance of the teacher’s

PowerPoint slides and subsequent uploading of them onto the Internet, she was able to understand the material better. The teachers' usage of technology to facilitate understanding of core concepts in her courses was then something that eased her socialization.

While many aspects of Mayuko's self-referential identity as a motivated, supported, and linguistically aware international student seemed to help her socialization process, two other facets of her experience, however, may have limited the extent to which she could move away from peripherality towards fuller membership: the changes to her customary school workload and the focus of her educational background.

One thing Mayuko repeatedly mentioned about her experience that she liked was the fact that the university libraries were open during all hours, which allowed her to spend a great deal of time on assignments.

### **Excerpt 9**

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Mayuko: "Yeah, and um ++ um + test time, or like essay time was really hard for me. It was December, almost end of the semester. I was staying all night till like eight in the morning from like ++ yeah, eight in the night until eight in the morning. And writing and reading essays, and it was really hard for me."

Interviewer: "So you spent a lot of time on schoolwork, okay?"

Mayuko: "Yeah, it takes like two weeks? To finish writing essays. Like two, or three essays I think, yeah."

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It is not only interesting to mention Mayuko's feelings about the large amount of

schoolwork in England (see also Excerpt 2), but also the fact that this sudden shift in workload may have somewhat limited opportunities for other types of spoken socialization.

Finally, her ten years of learning English focused primarily on American English, including, presumably, American culture. This fact would certainly have prepared her for a slightly different cultural zone, but the largest difference would arguably be the language and the British accent. By Mayuko's own admission, her initial difficulties adjusting in England were linguistic, and this is probably also why she immediately perceived the summer intensive ESL course so helpful to her:

#### **Excerpt 10**

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Mayuko: "It was really hard to adjust in that community, I mean British English, because it ++ I get + I got used to + listen and speak American English, but once I + got there, I couldn't understand people speaking at first, so..."

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Despite her statements that place "understanding people speaking" within her "at first" phase only, I would nevertheless submit that a twelve-week summer ESL course, regardless of its formality and intensiveness, is hardly a replacement for the previous eleven years of American English education that she received in terms of sheer input volume. To put it another way, there were probably other limitations to socialization that she experienced due to the differences between her learned language (American English) and the language to which she was exposed (British English), but the interview may not reflect this, because a limitation – especially when speaking of language – must be recognized and 'unlearned' before it can be articulated in so many words to an interviewer.

## **Nanako and Mayuko: A comparison and final analysis**

In 2004, Naoko Morita conducted a study on several 'Asian women' from Japan, who were graduate students at a university in Canada. One of the students in the study, Nanako, was characterized by her silence in all three of her classes (Morita, 2004). Compared to Nanako, Mayuko's study abroad experience appears to have been relatively positive. Nanako, who was silent in classes, felt marginalized and construed as an 'other' by her classmates and teachers in two of her three courses. On the other hand, Mayuko felt that participating in class discussions and asking questions were not difficult (see Excerpt 1). Once again, the notion of language socialization as a process that is bidirectional is of paramount importance. Nanako's experience with her teachers evidences that her identity as a 'silent other' was legitimated and endorsed by one of her teachers on account of her ostensible English language deficiency (also a form of 'othering'), and her concerns regarding her classroom silence were largely ignored by her other teachers.

Instead, as has been previously discussed, Mayuko's teachers were very helpful in giving her sound advice concerning any problems or stressful situations that she encountered while in England. It is also possible that Mayuko had more resources to facilitate her socialization from which she could draw support, such as her friend in Oxford and the likelihood that academic study abroad programs have become more popular for Japanese students since 1999, when Nanako was interviewed about her experience. Of course, Mayuko and Nanako are different people who were enrolled in different academic programs in different times and different places, but the comparison between their socialization experiences is nevertheless interesting as it serves to underscore the dynamism evident in language socialization. Further, as teachers and educators, realizing that socialization does not always occur encourages us to attend to not only the linguistic, but also the social elements that are part and parcel of our

classrooms and institutions.

Overall, Mayuko's socialization into her new academic community in England was a partial success. This is because of her self-identification as a motivated student, the support of her ESL teachers, the advice garnered from her friend in Oxford and peers at home, and the intensive summer ESL course she attended before taking formal university coursework. Her socialization was slightly limited, however, by the fact that her preparation in Japan was heavily focused on American English, which may have prepared her for a different set of linguistic exposure than what she truly experienced. Moreover, her socialization was limited in the sense that she was required to spend an inordinate amount of time in the library completing *written* (italics for emphasis) homework assignments and essays for school. In this way, she may have missed important extra-curricular opportunities for deeper, natural *spoken* (italics for emphasis) involvement and interaction with native speakers of the language – the main reason that she wanted to study abroad in the first place.

### **Closing Remarks:**

Despite the claims of some studies in which there is stark resistance to socialization that takes place (Morita, 2004; Duff, 2010), Mayuko claims to have had little trouble adjusting to her new academic discourse community. As a teacher, this serves as a reminder that indeed, not everyone has problems adjusting, and that many factors govern this. In Mayuko's case, it seems that it was a combination of both her willingness and acceptance of the fact that her new community would follow a different set of practices than her university in Japan as well as her teachers' positive stance towards novices adjusting to the new community. Yet again, this interview highlights the importance and power of bi-directionality in tracing the contours of language socialization and ascertaining whether or not a given case was a success.

Finally, Mayuko's situation poses questions for rumination and reflection, especially on the part of communities of education. Is it indeed the goal of academic study abroad programs to have students spend a majority of their time in the library completing written school assignments? Does this not somewhat limit the opportunities available for other types of extra-curricular socialization and language learning? Again, the main reason that Mayuko wanted to study abroad was to improve her speaking and listening skills in the British English language, skills in which she initially considered herself to be lacking. Questions like these may be answered and addressed in future research.

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Mayuko asked that I use her real name for the research.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'study abroad student' and 'international student' are used interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The interviewee agreed to be recorded for the purpose of data collection and storage for this research (M. Kurobe, Interview, April 6, 2012).

### **References:**

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## **Interview Questions:**

1. So you are a Japanese student who decided to study abroad in England. Could you briefly describe why you decided to do this?
2. What is your academic major?
3. Why did you choose England?
4. Could you compare your academic experience in England with your experience in Japan?
5. What are the main ways in which they differ?
6. What kinds of courses did you take in England?
7. Could you describe a typical day at school in England for you?
8. What is your general impression of the courses you took in terms of their structure?
9. What are some of the most memorable things about your study abroad experience?
10. Overall, what is your opinion of study abroad? Was it everything you thought it would be?
11. Were there other students from Japan studying at your university in England, and if so, did you get to know them well?
12. How about students who were not Japanese? Did you feel that you had many opportunities to practice English with native speakers?
13. As for your teachers, what did you think about them? What was your relationship with them?
14. When you were in class, what were you expected to do as a student?
15. As you mentioned earlier, Japanese classrooms are structured a bit differently than English ones. What were some of the things that you needed to do in order to participate in class?
16. How did you feel about making these changes?
17. Did your status as 'female' or 'woman' have any effect on you in Japan or England?

