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# *Effects of Varying Lengths of Study-Abroad Experiences on Japanese EFL Students' L2 Writing Ability and Motivation: A Longitudinal Study*

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The present study investigated the effects of varying lengths of overseas experiences on 37 Japanese students' English writing ability and motivation over 3.5 years. The students were observed at the beginning of their first year and in the middle of their second, third, and fourth years at their university. During the 3.5-year observation period, 28 of the 37 students spent 1.5 to 11 months in English-speaking countries. The results revealed that (1) students' second language (L2) writing ability did not change in a linear way; (2) over the 3.5 years, students who spent some time abroad significantly improved their L2 writing ability whereas those who stayed in Japan did not; (3) many of those students who went abroad formed L2-related *imagined communities* that possibly motivated them to improve their L2 writing ability; (4) those students who spent more than 4 months abroad improved their L2 writing ability significantly more than the other students; and (5) only those students who spent more than 8 months abroad became intrinsically motivated and voluntarily practiced to improve their L2 writing.

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The present study investigates changes over 3.5 years in the second language (L2) writing ability and motivation of 37 Japanese students, with special attention paid to the effects of varying lengths of overseas experience. The study is a follow-up of Sasaki (2004), where I reported on changes in L2 proficiency, L2 writing quality and fluency, and the use of L2 writing strategies among 11 participants. In that study, I found that the participants' 2- to 8-month study-abroad (SA) experiences had a significant impact on their L2 writing strategy use and on their motivation. When the present study originally started, I had simply intended to confirm these results by using a larger sample from a similar population. However, having spent a total of 6 years observing 37

participants, I realized that not only the overseas experience itself but also its variable length could potentially impact this particular sample (see Sasaki, 2009).<sup>1</sup> As a result, I changed the mode of the present study from confirmatory to exploratory.

Furthermore, unlike in Sasaki (2004), where I mainly analyzed the participants' cognitive abilities and activities, in the present study I drew on modern sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and examined the participants' cognitive changes as situated in their environments. I did so because the findings of my previous studies (e.g., Sasaki, 2004, 2007) convinced me that L2 learning could be significantly influenced by the specific contexts in which it takes place. Among many sociocultural research methods available to approach the data, I employed Yang, Baba, and Cumming's (2004) framework, which is based on Engeström's (1987) expanded activity system, and, in order to explain the particularities of the data in the present study, I further adopted Kanno and Norton's (2003) notion of imagined communities.

Below I present the results of previous studies that have targeted the three key factors considered in the present study: L2 writing ability, L2 writing motivation, and effects of SA experiences on L2 writing.

## **L2 WRITING ABILITY DEVELOPMENT**

Traditionally, factors that might influence the development of L2 writing ability have been investigated mainly through cross-sectional studies of cognitive variables. These studies have usually involved comparing less skilled with more skilled writers. The results of these studies have revealed that the quality of L2 writing tends to be high if the writers have high L2 proficiency (e.g., Pennington & So, 1993) or high first-language (L1) writing ability (e.g., Cumming, 1989), if they use good writers' strategies such as effective planning (Jones & Tetroe, 1987), if they possess sufficient metaknowledge (e.g., Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2001), and if they have practiced L2 writing sufficiently (e.g., Sasaki & Hirose, 1996).

Although these characteristics of good writers might be truly influential in L2 writing ability development, they could simply co-occur with good L2 writing. In contrast, the findings of longitudinal case studies may be more convincing because these studies employed the participants' own (emic) accounts of what they thought was actually useful for their L2 writing development. Past case studies have reported

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<sup>1</sup> In Sasaki (2009), I reported changes in the L2 writing ability and motivation of 22 of the same 37 participants. The study was based on the data I collected during the first 5 of the 6 years I spent collecting data for the present study.

how the participants managed to learn appropriate writing skills by employing both cognitive strategies, such as “looking for models” (Leki, 1995, p. 249), and social strategies, such as consulting “on a problem related to a task” (Riazi, 1997, p. 127).

Motivated by these previous studies, I conducted a series of longitudinal studies targeting participants similar to those in the present study (i.e., Japanese university students). For example, in Sasaki (2004), I observed changes in L2 writing ability and strategy use in 11 Japanese students over 3.5 years. Based on the participants’ accounts from interviews and on changes in their composition scores, I concluded that their 3.5 years of both domestic and overseas education helped the participants improve their L2 writing ability, although only those who spent more than 2 months abroad became more motivated to write better compositions. In a subsequent study (Sasaki, 2007) with yet another group of participants, I further compared six SA students, who spent 4–9 months abroad, with five at-home (AH) students, who remained in Japan for just over 1 year, during which the SA students spent some time overseas. The results indicate that the SA students significantly improved their L2 writing ability and motivation whereas the AH students did not improve in either of these two areas. The results of these studies suggest that, at least for students of Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL), overseas experiences can have a strong positive impact on their L2 writing ability and motivation but that the instruction they receive inside Japan can also be useful for some students (e.g., the students in Sasaki, 2004). These studies are precursors of the present study.

## **L2 WRITING MOTIVATION**

Most current research on L2 motivation has investigated how L2 motivation might interact with other cognitive, psychological, and/or social factors such as attitude and anxiety, and the methods used have been typically psychometric, utilizing correlations among scores and questionnaire responses (e.g., Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). More recently, however, researchers such as Dörnyei (e.g., 1998) have criticized such research for treating the construct of motivation as a static state and for not taking into account variation over time and across situations. Dörnyei and Ottó (1998), for example, developed an alternative process model of L2 motivation, positing motivation as “a dynamically evolving and changing entity” (p. 44). Based on this assumption, Dörnyei and Ottó’s model presents a panorama of how a person starts with a “preactional phase” (p. 48, e.g., a “goal”), moves on to the actual execution of the intended task, and ends with a

“postactional phase” (p. 48, e.g., “further planning”), with each of these phases affected by various “motivational influences” (p. 48) such as the person’s psychological orientation and external environments. If we treat motivation as such a dynamic and situated mechanism, case studies using emic qualitative data provide appropriate avenues for the study of L2 learners’ motivational behaviors. Shoaib and Dörnyei (2005) exemplified one such study investigating motivational changes in 25 participants over their lifetime through biographical interview data, but, to date, such studies have been scarce. Furthermore, even with such a drastic shift in the focus of L2 motivation studies, the target of motivation research has mostly remained general L2 proficiency, and motivation related to any particular skill or type of knowledge has rarely been examined.

Thus the construct of L2 writing motivation was not considered until early 2000, when Alister Cumming and his colleagues started a series of studies of L2 writing goals and motivation (see Cumming, 2006). Their participants were all English as a second language (ESL) students in university settings in Canada. Addressing the above-mentioned criticism that L2 motivation research lacked the perspective of time and context, Cumming and his colleagues employed longitudinal and situated data. Yang et al. (2004), for example, provided a microlevel analysis of changes in L2 motivation in six ESL students over the course of an ESL program. To explain the qualitative changes in the participants’ L2 writing motivation, Yang et al. used Engeström’s (1987) expanded activity system, believing that “individual students are active, responsive agents with their own individual goals, orientations, values, beliefs, and histories” (Yang et al., p. 14). In addition to this activity theory perspective, Cumming and his colleagues (2006) employed goal theory from the field of psychology for its “multiple theoretical frames” (p. ix) in seven collaborative studies focusing on both students’ and their teachers’ goals for learning and teaching L2 writing. The results of these studies are insightful in that they indicate how L2 students’ and teachers’ motivation constantly interacted with environmental factors. Yet, from the perspective of foreign language (FL) writing research, the investigation of students’ goals for learning L2 writing may not be very meaningful because FL students do not always have to set or achieve L2 writing goals to survive in their own communities, where the L2 is not used for communicative purposes. However, no study to date has been conducted to investigate such L2 writing motivation in an FL setting.

## EFFECTS OF SA EXPERIENCES

Research on effects of SA experiences has become increasingly popular, especially during the past two decades (e.g., Kinginger, 2008). Researchers have discovered that, compared with their AH counterparts, (1) SA students improved in their L2 speaking ability (e.g., Lafford, 2004), L2 listening ability (e.g., Allen, 2002), and L2 reading ability (e.g., Dewey, 2004); (2) SA students changed their sociolinguistic use of the L2 (e.g., Barron, 2006); (3) their sociocultural environments played an important role in such changes (e.g., Iino, 2006); and (4) there were substantial individual differences in the scope and magnitude of these changes (e.g., Isabelli-García, 2006).

Although these findings are informative, many other aspects of the effects of SA experiences remain unexplored. For example, Churchill and Dufon (2006) summarized previous studies investigating possible SA effects on students' linguistic skills, but none of the studies they surveyed addressed the acquisition of L2 writing skills specifically. Similarly, the variable of L2 learning motivation has rarely been examined in terms of the effects of overseas experiences. Even though previous studies indicated that SA experiences tend to have positive impacts on participants' motivation (e.g., Simões, 1996), some studies reported otherwise (e.g., Allen, 2002).

In addition to the above-mentioned scarcity of studies of the effect of SA experiences on L2 writing and motivation, very few studies to date have examined the effects of SA experiences on the specific variable of L2 writing motivation, one of the targeted variables in the present study. Furthermore, very few studies have examined the effects of the length of overseas stays. Although a stay of even a few weeks can have some impact on listening and speaking (Campbell, 1996), "the question of how long is needed to make significant gains in specific skills remains unanswered" (Churchill & Dufon, 2006, p. 23). Finally, very few studies have reported any long-term effects of SA experiences. Several qualitative studies using retrospective accounts have examined the impact of spending time abroad on students' subsequent life (e.g., career choice) over quite a long period of time (8 years in Ehrenreich, 2006), but few quantitative studies have been conducted to investigate such effects on any L2 skill or motivation.

Informed and motivated by the results (or lack thereof) of these previous studies as well as my own studies, I undertook the present study with the following four questions in mind:

1. How does students' L2 writing ability change over 3.5 years?
2. How does their L2 writing motivation change over 3.5 years?
3. How do any motivational changes interact with changes in their L2 writing ability?

4. Do differences in length in the students' SA experiences have differential impacts on their L2 writing ability and motivational changes?

In Question 1, I defined L2 writing ability as an academic ability to write in “pedagogical genres” (Johns, 1997, p. 46) such as “the essay examination response, the term paper, or the pedagogical summary” (p. 46). As regards Question 2, I follow Dörnyei and Ottó (1998, p. 65) in defining motivation as “the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalised, and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out,” and I employed Dörnyei and Ottó’s process model of L2 motivation as the research baseline.

## METHOD

### Participants

The 37 participants (9 in 2002, 13 in 2003, and 15 in 2004) entered the same university in Japan as members of a cohort consisting each year of about 150 British and American Studies majors.<sup>2</sup> They were all 18 years old at the time. They came from three of five freshman English classes (with about 30 students each) offered under the same title each year, and I taught two of the three classes. Each year I went to their first day of classes and asked for volunteers to participate in an English-writing project that would require up to 90 minutes of their time once or twice a year until graduation. They were informed that they would receive modest monetary compensation for their participation. A total of 40 students volunteered, and 37 provided full data for the present study. The 37 students had studied English for six years by the time the study began, but they had received little L2 writing instruction while in high school.

Between their second and fourth year of university study (see Table 1), 28 of the 37 students participated in SA programs provided by the university, spending different lengths of time in Canada, England, the United States, Australia, or New Zealand. The participants were subsequently divided into four groups according to the length of their overseas stay. The SA-1.5–2 group (1 male and 8 females) spent 1.5–2 months abroad,<sup>3</sup> the SA-4 group (2 males and 5 females) 4 months, the

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<sup>2</sup>The official name of the department is English, but the students do not study English as intensively as might be generally expected of English majors. Instead, they focus more of content areas related to linguistics, literature, and area studies. I thus decided to label their major British and American Studies to avoid any misunderstanding.

<sup>3</sup>Four students spent 6 weeks, and the other five students spent 2 months abroad.

TABLE 1

## English-Related Educational Experiences Over the Four University Years and Mean Departure and Return Points

Group	Mean departure point	Mean return point	Length of study abroad (months)	Mean class hours/week when abroad		Mean English class hours/week when in Japan			
				ESL	Regular subject	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year
AH ( <i>n</i> = 9)	N/A	N/A	0	0	0	8.8	6.2	6.1	1.0
SA-1.5-2 ( <i>n</i> = 9)	2nd year, 11th month	3rd year, 1st month	1.5-2	23.1	N/A	9.0	5.7	4.5	1.2
SA-4 ( <i>n</i> = 7)	2nd year, 6th month	2nd year, 11th month	4	10.7	4.3	9.0	5.4	6.5	2.4
SA-8-11 ( <i>n</i> = 12)	2nd year, 11th month	3rd year, 10th month	8-11	13.9	4.6	9.0	4.7	3.8	0.6

Note. AH = at home; SA = study abroad; ESL = English as a second language.

SA-8-11 group (3 males and 9 males) 8-11 months,<sup>4</sup> and the AH group (2 males and 7 females) remained in Japan during the 3.5-year observation period. All the institutions where the SA students studied were 4-year universities admitting English-speaking students.

The students' English writing ability differed slightly even when they were in their first year. That is, the SA-4 group's mean composition score (138.14 out of a maximum of 200) was significantly higher than that of the SA-1.5-2 group (116.44, see the Results and Discussion section). However, there was no other significant difference across the four groups' composition scores. In addition, there was no significant difference across the four groups when they were first-year students in terms of general English proficiency measured by the sum of the Listening and Structure Section scores of the *Comprehensive English Language Test*, Harris and Palmer (1986),  $F(3, 33) = 2.07$  for a maximum of 200. At this university, students had to earn high scores on the institutionalized TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language, Educational Testing Service) to attend the SA-4 and SA-8-11 (but not the SA-1.5-2) programs, and the SA-8-11 program was more competitive than the SA-4 program. In this sense, the SA-4 and SA-8-11 groups may have been more motivated to study English than the other groups from the beginning of the present study.

<sup>4</sup>Three students spent 8 months, four spent 9 months, three spent 10 months, and two spent 11 months abroad.



Table 1 presents the mean departure and returning-home times of the SA groups as well as the mean hours of English classes the participants took while overseas and in Japan. Note that on average the SA-4 group went abroad earlier (2nd year, 6th month) than the SA-1.5-2 and SA-8-11 groups (2nd year, 11th month for both groups), and the SA-4 group came home earliest (2nd year, 11th month) and the SA-8-11 group latest (3rd year, 10th month). A total of 19 (67.9%) out of the 28 SA students had their overseas experiences between the second half of their second year and the first half of their third year at the university. While abroad, the SA-1.5-2 students took ESL classes only, whereas some (though not all) of the SA-4 and SA-8-11 students took both ESL and regular subject classes. The number of English classes these four groups took at the Japanese university drastically decreased during their fourth year because they had already taken the number of English classes required for graduation by the end of their third year and because they were busy job-hunting during their fourth year.

## Data Collection

I collected L2 writing and motivation data at four different points: in the first month of the participants' first year (early-first-year period) and the fourth month of their second, third, and fourth year (mid-second-year, mid-third-year, and mid-fourth-year periods). In the eighth month of their fourth year (late-fourth-year period), I also interviewed the students to collect their own accounts of any changes in their L2 writing ability and motivation.

## Composition Scores

The participants wrote an argumentative composition on a randomly selected topic concerning such issues as living in a city or in the country (see Sasaki, 2004). The prompts were selected in such a way that the participants were able to write about different topics on the four different occasions and so that similar ratios of participants in the four groups addressed the same topics.

Two EFL writing specialists scored all the compositions, following Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey's (1981) *English Composition Profile*. The raters were not informed of the purpose of the present study, when each composition was written, or from which participant group it came. The interrater correlation (Pearson correlation coefficient) for the content subscore was 0.89; for the organization subscore, 0.85; for the vocabulary subscore, 0.78; for the language use subscore, 0.80; for the mechanics subscore, 0.53 (caused by the very



narrow score range of 1–5);<sup>5</sup> and for the total score, 0.93. Overall, I judged that these correlations were acceptable for the study.

## **Interviews About L2 Writing Strategies, L2 Classes, and Motivation Conducted After Each Composition Session**

After the participants wrote the compositions described above, I interviewed each of them individually in Japanese about their experiences related to English learning over the previous year and which aspect of English writing they wanted to improve, if any. The sessions lasted about 30 minutes each.

## **Late-Fourth-Year Interviews on Changes in L2 Writing Ability and Motivation**

Four months after the participants wrote their mid-fourth-year compositions, I interviewed them individually in Japanese again to collect accounts of what they thought had influenced changes in their L2 writing ability, fluency, and strategy use over the past 3.5 years. During the interviews, I showed the participants a table or a graph showing their actual changes on these variables over this period (I did not use the fluency and strategy use data in the present study). Addressing motivational changes, I showed them the transcripts of what they had said when asked which aspects of English writing they wanted to improve in each of the four data collection sessions. I also asked them additional questions about what other aspects, if any, they might have wanted to improve over the given year, why they had these particular goals, and what they did to achieve these goals. For those who did not mention any aspect they wanted to improve, I showed them a list (written in Japanese) of possible areas to be improved in L2 writing, based on Cumming's (2006) scheme probing L2 writing motivation (see Sasaki, 2009 for list content). Each late-fourth-year interview session lasted 30–60 minutes. All interview accounts were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

## **Analysis of Interview Data**

When analyzing the transcribed interview data, I followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) data synthesis tactics, especially those concerning noting "patterns, themes" (p. 245), and making "contrasts/comparisons" (p. 245). I used the interview data about the participants' English-

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<sup>5</sup> Pearson correlation coefficients tend to be lower if the ranges of the given variables are more restricted than others (see Linn, 1968, for example).

related experiences and reasons for changes in their L2 writing ability in order to better interpret the quantitative data on changes in the participants' L2 composition scores. I also analyzed the interview data about the participants' motivational changes for their own sake. As I mentioned earlier, I adopted Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) definition of L2 motivation and I analyzed the participants' changes in L2 writing motivation using the research framework of Yang et al. (2004). I decided to employ this framework because it had worked successfully for analyzing phenomena similar to the ones targeted in the present study and because it shared with Dörnyei and Ottó's model two crucial assumptions of methods accommodating sociocultural theory, namely, (1) that learners are active agents of L2 learning, and (2) that L2 learning processes can be influenced by various internal/external factors.

The framework of Yang et al. (2004) assumes that L2 learners' thought processes and actions are mediated by *artifacts* or sociocultural entities when the participants as *subjects* operate on the *object* of learning L2 writing. As Yang et al. explain (p. 15):

*To take an example of second language (L2) learning, a student (subject) in an ESL class aims to improve her competence in academic English writing (object). This student may follow the teacher's instruction, do assignments, read a textbook, talk with friends, surf the Internet, refer to dictionaries and so on (mediating artifacts). After a period of practice this student may achieve her goal such as getting a high grade on her essays (outcome). This activity happens in the ESL class (community), and the student intends to grasp the conventions of academic English writing (rules). In this ESL class, the teacher provides model instruction, gives assignments, and offers feedback, and students follow their teacher and do the assignments (division of labor).*

In addition to the original categories used by Yang et al. (2004), I included two more categories in the present study: Imagined L2-related community and Imagined non-L2-related community. I did this because, in the process of analyzing the interview data, I realized that these categories were also important for understanding the participants' motivational changes. Subsequently, I changed the term *community* in the scheme of Yang et al. to *actual L2-related community* to distinguish it from the two imagined communities. For the term *imagined community*, I followed Kanno and Norton's (2003, p. 241) definition of "groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of imagination."

In the framework of Yang et al. (2004), we can assume that "object" corresponds to "goal" or "intention" in the "preactional phrase" of Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998, p. 48) model. If the subject actually tries to accomplish his/her object through a range of mediating artifacts, we can

say that he/she actually launches into what Dörnyei and Ottó (p. 48) call the “actional phase.” The other components of community, imagined community, and division of labor can form what Dörnyei and Ottó (p. 48) call the “motivational influences” affecting the student’s motivational behavior.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### L2 Writing Ability

I first present changes in the participants’ L2 composition scores for descriptive purposes. I then present the results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to display the degree of change between the early-first-year and mid-fourth-year periods, using SPSS Version 6.1 (SPSS, 1994). However, because of the small sample sizes, the results of the ANOVA analyses should not be generalized.

As shown in Table 2, the four groups’ scores increased until their second year, but the AH group’s score then decreased and even dropped below their first-year level in their fourth-year composition. By contrast, the three SA groups’ fourth-year composition scores were all higher than those of their first-year compositions, but the SA-8–11 group was the only one that continually improved until the fourth year. A two-way ANOVA comparing the differences across the four groups between their first and fourth years indicated a significant interaction between time and group effects [ $F(3, 33) = 7.43, p < 0.001$ ].

The results of subsequent post-hoc simple effects analysis and multiple comparisons (Tanaka & Yamagiwa, 1992) revealed the following. First, when the students were in their first year, there was no difference across the four groups except that the SA-4 group’s composition scores were significantly higher than those of the SA-1.5–2 group (mean square error (MSE) = 233.40,  $p < 0.05$ ). In the fourth year, the SA-4 and SA-8–11 groups’ scores were significantly higher than

**TABLE 2**  
Mean Total Composition Scores (Total Possible = 200) at Four Observation Times

Group	Early-1st-Year <i>M (SD)</i>	Mid-2nd-Year <i>M (SD)</i>	Mid-3rd-Year <i>M (SD)</i>	Late-4th-Year <i>M (SD)</i>
AH ( $n = 9$ )	130.56 (12.01)	137.11 (14.31)	135.00 (14.93)	128.22 (10.44)
SA-1.5–2 ( $n = 9$ )	116.44 (18.37)	131.78 (18.21)	130.56 (15.49)	133.89 (20.97)
SA-4 ( $n = 7$ )	138.14 (13.28)	146.57 (10.03)	169.00 (7.07)	161.43 (9.60)
SA-8–11 ( $n = 12$ )	130.58 (13.77)	152.00 (12.45)	158.17 (19.96)	161.75 (8.59)

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

those of the AH and SA-1.5–2 groups, but there was no significant difference between the AH and SA-1.5–2 groups or between the SA-4 and the SA-8–11 groups ( $MSE = 196.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, the three SA groups significantly improved their composition scores over the 3.5 years, whereas the AH group did not:  $F(1, 33) = 10.09$ ,  $p < 0.01$  for the SA-1.5–2 group;  $F(1, 33) = 17.98$ ,  $p < 0.01$  for the SA-4 group; and  $F(1, 33) = 32.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$  for the SA-8–11 group.

At the individual level, English composition scores for four of the nine AH students decreased over the 3.5 years, and scores for the other five students increased slightly. Two of these five students mentioned that English classes at the Japanese university were helpful in learning to write better. However, the other seven students (77.7%), including the three whose composition scores increased slightly, felt that their English writing ability deteriorated below their first-year level because, from their fourth year onward, they took fewer English classes. By contrast, all of the SA students' English composition scores improved over the 3.5 years. Four SA-1.5–2 and three SA-4 students attributed this improvement mainly to the English writing classes they took at the Japanese university. One SA-1.5–2, four SA-4, and four SA-8–11 students attributed it to the English writing classes they took abroad, and two SA-1.5–2 students and eight SA-8–11 students attributed it to the classes they took both in Japan and abroad. Another SA-1.5–2 student said that writing e-mails to friends she made abroad was the only helpful factor, and the last SA-1.5–2 student said that the third- and fourth-year compositions were simply easier to write.

It is noteworthy that many (60.7%) of the SA students attributed their English writing improvement solely or partially to the English classes they took in Japan. As can be seen in Table 2, these students all improved their English composition scores before going abroad as well as after coming home. The students reported that learning explicitly how to write in English (e.g., learning the idea of a topic sentence) and practicing writing different types of texts (usually a paragraph long) in these classes was useful.

Similarly, the 19 SA students who attributed their score increase at least partially to their overseas L2 writing classes also added that the experiences of learning how to write and having to write a lot and often overseas were helpful. However, compared with the assignments required by their English classes in Japan, the writing assignments required by their overseas classes were much more demanding. For example, in her first semester in the United States, Eri, an SA-8–11 student, took four classes, two of which required writing papers. In the ESL writing class, she learned how to organize effective paragraphs and wrote 4 two-page essays and 1 seven-page essay. In her other class (Elementary Education), she wrote a total of 6 two-page papers. In her

English classes in Japan, she never wrote so much and so often (she only wrote four paragraphs per semester at the maximum).

These SA students' accounts concur with the findings of previous cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (e.g., Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2001) in that the two factors of L2 writing metaknowledge and practice influenced L2 writing development. Given the greater percentages of the SA-4 (57%) and SA-8-11 students (100%) who attributed their English writing improvement at least partially to their overseas classes compared with the SA-1.5-2 students (33.3%), and given that the SA-4 and SA 8-11 groups improved significantly more than the SA-1.5-2 group, we could further speculate that long and intensive practice was probably a crucial factor in significantly improving these students' L2 writing. By contrast, as mentioned above, many AH students felt that their English writing ability fell below their first-year level because they had fewer English classes during their fourth year. This is especially noteworthy when we recall that many of the SA students whose scores increased for their fourth-year compositions also had fewer English classes after becoming fourth-year students (Table 1). Consequently, despite what they claimed, the perceived and actual deterioration in the AH students' L2 writing ability in the fourth year might be better explained by their low motivation rather than by the reduction in L2 contact hours.

## L2 Writing Motivation

Tables 3a-3d present the four groups' changes in the relevant components of the revised version of the research scheme of Yang et al. (2004; see the Method section). Presented here are the tendencies shared by more than 40% of the members of each group. I did not include the components of rules and division of labor from Engeström's (1987) expanded activity system because, as in Yang et al., in the participants' *activity* of studying L2 writing over 3.5 years, the rule (i.e., how to write in the academic genre) and the division of labor (i.e., the participants studied and the teachers taught) were unchanged.

Table 3a shows the characteristics of the four groups' L2 writing motivation when they were first-year students. Under the column for Object, the four groups were all motivated to improve some aspects (mainly grammar, vocabulary, and quantity) of their L2 writing. The only difference is that, as can be seen in the column Mediating artifact (i.e., what was involved in the participants' trying to attain their objects), 66.7% of the AH group reported doing nothing to improve their L2 writing whereas all the other groups used textbooks, dictionaries, and teachers to achieve their goals. Using Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process

TABLE 3a

Students' L2 Writing Motivation and Related *Artifact* Components in First Year

Group	Object	Mediating artifact	L2-related actual community	L2-related imagined community	Non-L2-related imagined community	Outcome
AH ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (44.4%), vocabulary (55.6%)	None (66.7%)	EFL classes (100%)			
SA-1.5–2 ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (66.7%), vocabulary (88.7%), quantity (44.4%), confidence (44.4%)	Textbooks, dictionary, teachers (66.7%)	EFL classes (100%)			
SA-4 ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Grammar (71.4%), vocabulary (85.7%), quantity (42.9%)	Textbooks, dictionary, teachers (71.4%)	EFL classes (100%)			
SA-8–11 ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Vocabulary (91.7%), quantity (41.7%)		EFL classes (100%)			

*Note.* Descriptions in Tables 3a–3d are given if they were shared by more than 40% of the participants. EFL = English as a foreign language.

model of L2 motivation, we can say that all four groups set some “goals” or “intentions” (p. 48) for improving their L2 writing, but the AH group remained in the “preactional phase” (p. 48) whereas the other three groups crossed the “metaphorical ‘Rubicon’ of action” (p. 57). In fact, more than half of the AH students continued to do nothing to improve their L2 writing until their fourth year (as shown in Tables 3a to 3d). Such constantly low motivation in the AH group helps to explain why their L2 composition scores decreased below their first-year level while the other three groups’ scores did not, over the 3.5 years of my observation period (seen in Table 2).

The four groups’ characteristics (presented in Table 3b) for their second year were similar to those for their first year, except that 19 (67.9%) of the 28 SA students had an SA experience starting during that year (i.e., they experienced ESL classes as their L2-related actual communities). This probably influenced their subsequent motivational behavior for L2 writing. One noticeable consequence of such influence is that many members of the three SA groups in their third and fourth

TABLE 3b

## Students' L2 Writing Motivation and Related Components in Second Year

Group	Object	Mediating artifact	L2-related actual community	L2-related imagined community	Non-L2-related imagined community	Outcome: L2 writing ability	
						Improved	Decreased
AH ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (44.4%) Vocabulary (44.4%)	None (66.7%)	EFL classes (100%)			55.6%	44.4%
SA-1.5-2 ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (66.7%) Vocabulary (66.7%) Quantity (44.4%)	Textbooks, reference books, teachers (66.7%)	ESL classes (44.4% for 2 months) EFL classes (100%)			88.9%	0%
SA-4 ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Grammar (57.1%) Vocabulary (57.1%) Quantity (42.9%)	Textbooks, reference books, (57.1%)	ESL classes (100% for 4 months) EFL classes (100%)			71.4%	28.6%
SA-8-11 ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Vocabulary (50%) Quantity (41.7%)	Textbooks, reference books, teachers (50%)	ESL classes (58.3% for 8-11 months) EFL classes (100%)			100%	

Note. 1.2 = second language.

years in university formed some kind of L2-related imagined communities that had not existed before. That is, after they became third-year students, when they had to write academic texts in the L2 as required in their English classes, many of them came to imagine communities where people used L2 for actual communicative purposes. Tables 3c and 3d show how this imagined communities' idea played out during their third and fourth years of study.

Looking across these two tables, for example, many SA-1.5-2 group members (66.7% in their fourth year) kept in touch with the L1 or L2 English-speaking friends they had made while abroad and corresponded with them in English through e-mail and/or internet chat after returning to Japan. In such correspondence, the SA-1.5-2 students often expressed the wish that they could still be among these pen pals in the same English-speaking places where they had once studied, and they talked with their pen pals about topics (e.g., the basketball team of the town) related to these places. We can call such places imagined communities because they were no longer physically accessible to the students.<sup>6</sup> The SA-1.5-2 students all felt that corresponding with these



TABLE 3c

## Students' L2 Writing Motivation and Related Components in Third Year

Group	Object	Mediating artifact	L2-related actual community	L2-related imagined community	Non-L2-related imagined community	Outcome: L2 writing ability	
						Improved	Decreased
AH ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (55.6%) Vocabulary (55.6%)	None (55.5%)	EFL classes (100%)			11.1%	66.7%
SA-1.5–2 ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (44.4%) Vocabulary (44.4%) Quantity (44.4%)	E-mail or online chatting (66.7%)	ESL classes (44.4% for 2 months) EFL classes (100%)	English-speaking communities imagined through cybernet correspondence (44.4%)		33.3%	55.6%
SA-4 ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Vocabulary (100%) Organization (42.9%) Planning (42.9%) Content (85.7%)	Teachers (44.4%) Textbooks (71.4%)	EFL classes (100%)	English-speaking communities imagined through cybernet correspondence (85.7%) ESL classes (71.4%)		85.7% Motivated to write better in L2 (85.7%)	14.3%
SA-8–11 ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Grammar (58.3%) Vocabulary (75%) Content (66.7%)	TOEIC/TOEFL (41.7%) English-L1 friends (41.7%)	ESL classes (41.7% for 8–11 months) EFL classes (100%)	English-speaking communities imagined through cybernet correspondence (58.3%) ESL classes (58.3%)		91.7% Motivated to write better in L2 (75%)	8.3%

Note: TOEIC = Test of English for International Communication; TOEFL = Test of English as a Foreign Language.

cybernet pen pals was useful for improving their English writing ability. In fact, writing good e-mails even became one of their major L2 writing goals in their fourth year (as shown in Table 3d).

Similarly, by their fourth year, all members of the SA-4 and SA-8–11 groups communicated with overseas friends through e-mail or online chat and imagined during such cybernet correspondence the communities

<sup>6</sup> My interpretation of the term *imagined community* is thus different from that of other researchers who assume that the imagined communities should be physically located in places where the students have never been (e.g., Kinginger, 2004).

TABLE 3d

## Students' L2 Writing Motivation and Related Components in Fourth Year

Group	Object	Mediating artifact	L2-related actual community	L2-related imagined community	Non-L2-related imagined community	Outcome: L2 writing ability	
						Improved	Decreased
AH ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (66.7%) Vocabulary (55.6%)	None (55.6%)	EFL classes (100%)		Community of professionals of their choice (66.7%)	66.7%	33.3% Lost interest in studying L2 writing (77.8%)
SA-1.5-2 ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Grammar (77.8%) Vocabulary (66.7%) How to write e-mail/letters (66.7%)	E-mail or online chatting (66.7%)	ESL classes (11.2%)- EFL classes (100%)	English-speaking communities imagined through cybernet correspondence (66.7%)	Community of professionals of their choice (55.5%)	66.7%	22.2%
SA-4 ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Vocabulary (71.4%)	TOEIC or STEP Test (71.4%)	EFL classes (100%)	English-speaking communities imagined through cybernet correspondence (100%) ESL classes (71.4%)	Community of professionals of their choice (85.7%)	71.4%	14.3% Motivated to write better in L2 (85.7%)
SA-8-11 ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Content (83.3%) Vocabulary (66.7%) Grammar (50%)	Self-directed writing (58.3%) Dictionary, reference books (58.3%)	EFL classes (100%)	English-speaking communities imagined through cybernet correspondence (100%) ESL classes (91.7%)	Community of professionals of their choice (83.3%)	83.3%	16.7% Motivated to write better in L2 (83.3%)

Note: STEP = Society for Testing English Proficiency.

they had once shared with these friends. However, when they wrote academic texts in English, none of them thought about such correspondence. Instead, 71.4% of the SA-4 group and 91.7% of the SA-8–11 group imagined how they had written in ESL and other regular subject classes they took while abroad (see Table 3d). In contrast, no SA-1.5–2 group member imagined such overseas classes when writing L2 academic texts. They simply drew on their experiences of how they could best respond to their cybernet pen pals in such cases. This difference between the SA-1.5–2 group and the pair of SA-4 and SA-8–11 groups can be attributed to the fact that the SA-4 and SA-8–11 groups experienced not only more opportunities to write but also a longer duration of overseas classes than the SA-1.5–2 group.

As mentioned earlier, in these classes, the SA-4 and SA-8–11 students learned how to organize effective compositions and they wrote various types of texts (e.g., term papers, summaries). When they first encountered writing assignments in these classes, many were shocked to find that they could not write as well as their classmates, including other international students, because none of them had ever learned how to write English texts longer than a paragraph. After having read relevant literature and written multiple drafts, however, they learned how to achieve higher grades. Fourteen (73.7%) out of the 19 SA-4 and SA-8–11 students also mentioned that the teachers' praise (one of the potential motivational influences for the postactional phase in Dörnyei and Ottó's 1998 model, p. 61) further encouraged them. Drawing on these episodes motivated the SA-4 and SA-8–11 students to write better academic texts even after returning home, as shown in Sachi's comments from her late-fourth-year interview:

### **Example**

Sachi, who spent 11 months in the United States, is talking about her first in-class test essay in a psychology class in the United States, where she was the only international student. (All accounts were originally in Japanese and were translated by the author.)

Sachi: After 30 minutes [for the test], I was told to stop, and I thought, "You are kidding! I have only written three lines! This is tragic!" (laughter)

Miyuki: (laughter)

Sachi: And then, when the test was returned, the teacher told me to study English harder. I was shocked because she meant that I should study English before I could study the content [of the class].

Miyuki: Oh.

Sachi: But the teacher had also made many suggestions on the test sheet about how I could have written the answer better.

Miyuki: Oh, she is kind, isn't she?

Sachi: Yes, and because of that, I thought I should try harder.

Miyuki: You mean you had to live up to the teacher's expectations?

Sachi: Yes, I thought I should try as a Japanese. Hooray for Japanese people!

Miyuki: (laughter)

Sachi: And even now, I feel that I should make efforts to write better when I write [in English].

Such motivation seems qualitatively different from the SA-1.5–2 students' motivation to simply improve a single aspect of their L2 writing (i.e., writing messages in cyberspace). This difference in motivation may also account for the fact that only the SA-4 and SA-8–11 groups were motivated to improve the content of their L2 writing after their third year (Tables 3c and 3d).

Last, as regards their fourth year (Table 3d), the most noticeable difference from the other years was that many participants formed imagined communities where they hoped to work after they graduated from university. This is related to the fact that many of them started hunting for jobs near the end of their third year. They spent the following 6–12 months taking exams and being interviewed for the best possible jobs they could get. Of the 37 participants, however, only 12 students (32.4%: 3 AH, 1 SA-1.5–2, 3 SA-4, and 5 SA-8–11) imagined professional communities that were English-related (e.g., a community of English teachers). As in their third year, many SA students continued to imagine L2-related communities, such as communities imagined through e-mail correspondence or overseas classes, when they wrote in English. However, these communities were not directly related to their future jobs. Underlying this phenomenon was the fact that, although their major (British and American Studies) was related to English, not many graduates at this university (only 16% in 2006) actually obtained employment directly related to English.

Consequently, the future-career-related imagined communities of these students did not necessarily lead to L2 writing improvement. In fact, 66.7% of the AH group and 85.7% of the SA-4 group showed decreases in their L2 composition scores, and in the late-fourth-year interviews, all of them attributed this decrease to being busy job-hunting. Yet seven (58.3%) of the 12 SA-8–11 students continued to voluntarily practice L2 writing even though such activity benefited the future career of only three of them. For example, Koji, an SA-8–11 student who came back to Japan in the middle of his third year, wrote a final report in English for his fourth-year sociology class when the teacher allowed him to do so even though writing the report in English was not required. His future-career-related imagined community was not related to English. And yet he chose to write in English because he believed that he could "do a good job if he tried with all the knowledge he had acquired in America and in the subsequent years" (from his late-fourth year

interview). This suggests that the motivations of these students had become more intrinsic or that they had become more autonomous learners, having acquired the ability to “identify goals, formulate their own goals, and . . . change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests” (Dickinson, 1995, p. 167). No other students exhibited such motivation throughout the observation period. Although it is not clear why only some SA-8–11 students acquired such learner autonomy, these SA-8–11 students are the most likely to keep trying to improve their L2 writing ability in the future.

## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In this section I summarize the results of this study and present some practical implications. First, the AH group’s motivational behaviors over the 3.5 years were different from those of the three SA groups, in that few AH students took concrete action to achieve their goals. Despite this lack of strong motivation, however, the AH group’s L2 writing ability continued to improve around their third year, probably because they took a relatively large number of English classes up to that point (Table 1). To obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree, they had to earn credits for these classes, and one can speculate that such an “incentive value of the outcome” (Dörnyei and Ottó, 1998, p. 53) was the major driving force behind their improvement. Once the external motivational force of L2 classes diminished, however, the students seemed to need to imagine L2-related communities in order to keep improving (Table 2). Furthermore, among the three SA groups who formed some kind of L2-related imagined communities after coming home, the SA-4 and SA-8–11 groups improved their composition scores significantly more than did the SA-1.5–2 group. This might be because these two groups had more and longer L2 writing practice, but also because their imagined L2-related communities were more directly connected to learning the ability targeted in the present study (i.e., academic writing). Last, although the reason for this is not clear, only the SA-8–11 group became intrinsically motivated and continued to develop, despite impeding fourth-year factors such as job hunting.

What implications for FL teaching do these results suggest? First, when instrumental motivation is in force, regular instruction such as providing students with L2 writing metaknowledge as well as different types of practice can lead to improvement to some degree. For a more lasting effect, however, it may be important for students to construct some kind of L2-related imagined communities. In the present study, SA students’ overseas experiences were helpful, but we know that not all FL students can afford to spend time abroad. It would be ideal if a way could

be found to create L2-related imagined communities without the necessity of going abroad. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) reported one such possibility, where Japanese high school students became more motivated and improved their English proficiency without going abroad by being introduced into “an imagined international community” (i.e., a model “United Nations,” p. 569) in content-based English classes. In a similar vein, preparing an L2 writing curriculum where students can participate in such communities through “cognitively and emotionally involving content” (p. 570) might be a promising approach in FL settings.

Another suggestion is based on the significant difference in improvement between the SA-1.5–2 group and the SA-4 and SA-8–11 pair. If teachers want to make their students’ motivation more influential, it would probably be better for the L2-related imagined communities to be accompanied by specific details of skills and knowledge related to the targeted abilities to be improved. In the case of L2 writing, for example, students must know how to plan and write effective compositions in the intended genre. Accumulation of such declarative and procedural knowledge would endow the students with what Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) call an “internal model of reference” (p. 57), which would be especially helpful for realizing preactional intentions. Furthermore, such knowledge has to be implemented through sufficient and continuous practice to result in a truly significant difference in output quality. Affective support such as teachers’ praise is also important for making the students’ motivation more enduring. Ideally, imagined communities should be substantial enough to transform dependent learners into autonomous ones, so that they keep improving even when demotivating external factors intervene.

## CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the long-term effects of varying lengths of overseas experiences on the L2 writing ability and motivation of 37 Japanese university students. The study revealed characteristics unique to the FL situation. For example, unlike the ESL learners studied by Cumming (2006), some learners took almost no action to achieve their goals. This was mainly due to the fact that L2 writing improvement was not necessary for their social survival. In contrast, spending some time overseas proved helpful not only in enabling the students to improve their L2 writing ability but also in maintaining their motivation to write better. The pedagogical implications presented in the last section of this article can thus be particularly useful for those who study an L2, where it is not used for communicative purposes.

Second, the sociocultural perspective adopted in the present study proved effective in capturing how different external factors (e.g., the length of overseas experiences) affect changes in learners' cognitive ability (e.g., L2 writing). It is interesting to consider how the four groups of students with similar L2 writing ability at the start became significantly different over a period of 3.5 years. These results make what Kramsch (2002) called the "ecology metaphor" of L2 learning look more convincing than the conventional cognitive-only approach because the former sees language learning in terms of "the dynamic interaction between language users and the environment as between parts of a living organism" (p. 3).

Finally, it should be noted that the present study is limited in terms of research design and should be followed by further studies in two main ways. First, from a positivistic perspective, the study should be replicated with a larger sample size for each of the four groups. Because of the small sample sizes in the present study, individual differences may have masked general patterns that might have emerged. In addition, we also need more in-depth studies of how changes in each individual are affected by various contextual factors, in order not to overlook critical individual differences that might be diluted in the search for generalizable patterns. For example, we need to investigate in more detail how different SA groups form their L2-related imagined communities. We also need to know why some students (like those in the SA-8-11 group) become self-regulated learners. Investigating these questions will provide further insight into how we can effectively enhance FL learners' L2 writing motivation and, consequently, their L2 writing ability on a long-term basis.

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