Learner Beliefs in Study-Abroad Experience: A Qualitative Case Study of Two Korean ESL Learners

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This paper investigates the role of L2 learner beliefs in study-abroad (SA) contexts. To date, the research of learner beliefs has relied mostly on survey methods, missing qualitative, critical evaluation reflecting the learners' voice. By adopting multiple qualitative research methods, idiosyncratic SA experience and learners' perception of it are reported by analyzing the data of two Korean college students experiencing changes in L2 learning beliefs and L2 proficiency before and after the SA. The data were collected through language learning autobiographies, semi-structured interviews, and stimulated recall tasks by using photos uploaded to the learners' personal web blogs. The findings show that 1) changes in L2 learning beliefs are related to the degree of legitimate peripheral participation in SA contexts and 2) L2 learners' mode of belonging to the SA community is a useful conceptual framework for explaining their L2 learning beliefs and their sense of success in SA experience. The results suggest that the crucial factor for successful SA L2 learning may not be L2-rich contexts per se but be the learners' recognition of and appreciation for L2 participation.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the role of second language (L2) learner beliefs in study abroad (SA) experience. We report on the results of a multiple case study of two Korean L2 learners who exhibited different L2 learning beliefs and modes of participation in SA. As

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with research on good language learner study (Griffiths, 2008), L2 learning beliefs have been actively investigated from the perspective of cognitive psychometrics. For example, Horwitz (1987) developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and endeavored to extract the universal characteristics of L2 learning beliefs. Because of the nature of quantitative survey methods that prevailed in the previous era, L2 learning beliefs have been generally regarded as a stable and internal factor (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005).

In the 1990s, however, a growing number of researchers began to challenge the cognitive view on L2 learning and learner beliefs. As Pavlenko (2000, p. 90) stated, “unlimited access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities should not be taken for granted in the study of SLA.” Even if learners have a composite of L2 learning beliefs, socio-historical conditions may sometimes function as barriers in terms of disconnecting their L2 beliefs from L2 learning behavior (cf. Norton, 2000, 2001).

In recent years, the cognitive orientation in this area has been complemented by a group of neo-Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) researchers (e.g., Alanen, 2003; Tae-Young Kim, 2007, 2008) who have argued that learner beliefs are created and modified through the interaction with their meaningful SA environment or affordances (van Lier, 2000). To date, few studies have explained how such situated awareness in SA contexts can take the lead in formulating L2 learner beliefs (Ewald, 2004; White, 2008). In particular, in SA where L2 learners stay in the L2 community for an extended period of time, it is widely believed that the more an L2 learner is exposed to authentic L2 input, the greater the L2 proficiency the learner can achieve. However, from an SCT perspective, which centralizes the role of mediation between human agency and the learner’s social contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), this belief requires robust empirical investigations because the belief alone cannot be a self-sufficient condition for high L2 proficiency achievement. Rather, the learners’ perception of the SA context and the contextual influence of their maintenance or adjustment of L2 learning beliefs need to be examined in future research in the 21st century (Ewald, 2004). Although anecdotal evidence (e.g., Duff, 1993; Schmidt, 1983) has indicated that the amount of exposure to the L2 in the target language community does not automatically guarantee native-like L2 proficiency, L2 learner beliefs from a similar case study orientation (Duff, 2008) is rarely found in academia.

For this reason, this study focuses on the role of beliefs and of contexts in L2 learning. Through semi-structured interviews, picture-cued stimulated recall tasks, and language learning autobiographies, this paper tracks two learners’ different learning trajectories during the SA period. Two contrasting cases show how the learners’ L2 beliefs fostered or hindered L2 learning participation. By presenting the dynamic relations between beliefs and language learning activities, it is argued that learner beliefs, as a regulatory mental tool, can construct learners’ L2 learning affordances to obtain legitimate status in the target
language community (Kinginger, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which in turn consolidates or attenuates their L2 learning beliefs.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As beliefs are gradually formulated as one’s life experiences progress chronologically, Kalaja and Barcelos (2003) stated that beliefs are dynamic, socially constructed, and inevitably context-embedded. As mentioned above, L2 learning beliefs are not created in vacuum and reflect a person’s previous life history, which refutes statistical predictability in open, complex systems (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). It should be noted that learner participation in L2 learning affects their L2 learning beliefs and that the beliefs in turn equally affect their subsequent participation in L2 learning activities. Moreover, from an SCT perspective (Tae-Young Kim, 2007, 2009, in press), the same participation in a similar L2 learning environment in SA does not guarantee similar L2 learning beliefs because of the different nature of mediation between each L2 learner and the affordances.

To understand the dynamics of L2 learner beliefs having constant interactions with the learner’s perception of SA experiences, a novel line of viewing learning as a mode of participation (Sfard, 1998; Wenger, 1998) is explained first in this section. In addition, the L2 learning beliefs conceptualized from the Vygotskian SCT perspective (Alanen, 2003; Tae-Young Kim, 2007, 2008) are discussed.

1. L2 Learning as Participation

In explaining human learning by using two prevalent metaphors — the acquisition metaphor (AM) and the participation metaphor (PM) — Sfard (1998) regarded the PM as learning through the process of gaining full membership in a community, or in “the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Unlike the AM, which prioritizes the acquisition of certain knowledge on the part of learners, the PM underscores that there exists mutuality between the learners and the learning contexts and that “the whole and the parts affect and inform each other” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). In understanding the PM, care should be taken such that the community refers to not only the physical place learners engage in (e.g., the L2 learning classroom) but also the imagined communities the learners envision in their mind, upon which social capital and power imbalance are manifested externally (Tae-Young Kim, 2007; Norton, 2001).

In the same vein, Lave and Wenger (1991) viewed learning as a situated process by which newcomers gradually gain legitimate status in a community by interacting with
more experienced community members. This process is called legitimate peripheral participation: legitimate in the sense that everyone is a potentially legitimate member of a community, peripheral in that newcomers gradually move from the margins of the activity meaningful in the community to the central venues of it, and participation in that human learning initiates by involving a set of relations with the old members of the community.

In contrast with learning as internalization, learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world. Conceiving of learning in terms of participation focuses attention on ways in which it is an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations; that is, ... consistent with a relational view, of persons, their actions, and the world, typical of a theory of social practice. (pp. 49-50)

Therefore, learners should acquire a certain level of accessibility through the creation of a set of relations to secure full participation in the learning community (Morita, 2004). Thus viewed, the struggle toward gaining legitimacy in SA contexts is intrinsically related to the longitudinal process of L2 learning.

In accounting for L2 learners’ different L2 learning activities, it is also relevant to refer to Wenger’s (1998) three distinctive modes of belonging:

1) Engagement- active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning
2) Imagination- creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience
3) Alignment- coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises (pp. 173-174)

Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging can be summarized as follows. Engagement is time-bound and inherently locally constructed. For example, an L2 learner can belong to an ESL class by merely attending the class without paying much attention to the curriculum. Thus, engagement, although included in the modes of belonging, does not guarantee a learner’s long-term commitment in the activity. Imagination, by contrast, is not limited to a group of specific activities because an L2 learner can have emotional attachments to not-yet realized communities. It should be noted that imagination, as a mode of belonging is clearly different from one’s personal fantasy in the sense that imagination stems from one’s current life conditions by which more sublime life conditions are imagined. In this regard, Wenger argued that “far from an individual withdrawal from reality, it is a mode of belonging that always involves the social world to expand the scope of reality and identity” (p. 178). Alignment, the third component by
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Wenger (1998), means participants’ coordination of their energies, actions, and practices to the community.

2. L2 Learner Beliefs from a Sociocultural Viewpoint

Learner beliefs can be broadly defined as “opinions and ideas that learners have about the task of learning a second/foreign language” (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p. 1). As previously stated, beliefs were regarded as a measurable and isolated entity which has “obvious relevance to the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language class” (Horwitz, 1988, p. 291). Thus, research on L2 beliefs was mainly conducted with a large set of cross-sectional data (e.g., Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). However, as a growing number of researchers began to raise the question on the static viewpoint of L2 beliefs, studies have shown that beliefs represent complex and multi-layered viewpoints born out of our experiences, dynamically evolving entity (e.g., Allen, 2010; Dufva, 2003; Tae-Young Kim, in press).

From a Vygotskian perspective, human activity is dialectically constructed through mediation1 between agents and the material and/or symbolic world (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Not only do physical environments constantly influence us but also symbolic artifacts and cultural practices empower us to regulate our biological endowment (i.e., our brain) through auxiliary means (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In this meditational process, learners are seen not as a mere recipient of a preset knowledge system but as agentive beings constantly searching for new social, linguistic resources that can enable them to resist undesirable identities, produce new identities, and assign alternative identities (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

To better understand L2 learners with their unique sociocultural history, there has been an increasing focus on L2 learner beliefs by SCT-oriented researchers who have regarded the beliefs as “a specific type of meditational means that the learner may or may not use during the language learning process” (Alanen, 2003, p. 60). For instance, when two L2 learners place a different value on L2 learning and make different L2 learning efforts based on their own L2 beliefs perceived efficacious, their motivational behavior as well as L2 learning experience can diverge. Then a point of interest is how the beliefs are formed and reflected upon learners’ L2 learning experience.

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1 According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006), mediation refers to “the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate (i.e., gain voluntary control over and transform) the material world or their own and each other’s social and mental activity” (p. 79).
Because SCT is relatively new in academia, thus far, L2 learner beliefs from the perspective of SCT have rarely been reported in Korea. By connecting the L2 learning motivation and L2 learner beliefs of two Korean immigrants, Tae-Young Kim (2008) highlighted the dual functions of L2 learner beliefs as a mediational tool. For Korean immigrants (as well as the Korean public in general), arguably the most widespread belief related to English might be the equation of high English proficiency with better job opportunities in the target language community. Another belief is that native English speakers who were born in an English-speaking country can provide the most authentic L2 input conducive to the enhancement of L2 learners’ proficiency. However, Tae-Young Kim’s previous research casts serious doubts on these beliefs. High L2 proficiency alone may not increase the prospect of employment. Instead, the synergistic effect of L2 proficiency and special job skills may be the determining factor. In addition, excessive beliefs in the effectiveness of native English speakers may function as an ineffective mediational tool for L2 learning because even in English-dominant countries such as the U.S. and Canada, many fluent English speakers also use other languages, either in home or the workplace. Given this reality, the beliefs in the effectiveness of native English speakers preclude the possibility to learn from many other non-native fluent English speakers and as a result can have a negative impact on learners’ L2 proficiency development.

However, despite the above notable exception, research efforts in Korea have not examined L2 learner beliefs from both the participation metaphor and SCT perspectives. The present study understands L2 learning experience as a process by which newcomers, including L2 students in SA, become gradually competent as they participate peripherally and legitimately in the SA community. Specifically, the study focuses on how learners’ mediation between L2 beliefs and the SA context affects each L2 learner’s perception of success. Based on these theoretical backgrounds, we posit two exploratory research questions:

1. How do learners’ beliefs affect the language learning process in a new L2 community?
2. How can we conceptualize learners’ beliefs from Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging and from a sociocultural viewpoint?

III. THE STUDY

Qualitative case study research aims to gain multiple understandings of a given phenomenon. Unlike quantitative research, which prioritizes generalizability, it focuses on particularization to facilitate the understanding of one’s own as well as others’ contexts and
lives through both similarities and differences across settings or cases (Duff, 2008; van Lier, 2005). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argued, the ultimate purpose of a qualitative case study is to contribute to the reader’s understanding in the particular research domain through the researcher’s rigorous subjectivity. In the same sense, qualitative researchers highly value principled data analysis for transferability\(^2\) by utilizing meticulous data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

1. Research Contexts

According to the National Institute for International Education (NIIE), about 90,000 Korean adult learners go abroad to learn English in 2008. Under the sweeping zeal for going abroad, there exist beliefs that studying in an English-dominant country would be beneficial in gaining a high level of L2 Proficiency (Tae-Young Kim, 2008; EunSil Lee, 2009). Reflecting upon this belief, the countries where English is used as a first (or official) language, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Philippines, the U.K., and the U.S., have become increasingly popular among ESL students (NIIE, 2008).

For this study, a pilot survey on SA was administered in a metropolitan university in Korea with the administrative support from the university’s language-related departments. Since the majority of previous research on SA mainly focused on a short-term timespan (e.g., Allen, 2010; Freed, 1995), it is imperative to investigate learners’ dynamically changing beliefs over a longer period of time (Dufva, 2003). For this reason, emails were used to find participants who had studied abroad for approximately one year, which was deemed as a relevant timespan for the investigation of L2 learners’ belief changes or maintenance through their legitimate peripheral participation in SA contexts (e.g., Alanen, 2003; Norton, 2000). After the preliminary screening based on the participant background such as L2 proficiency, the place of SA, and the duration of SA, six participants having similar profiles were selected initially and sent a consent letter for their research participation (see Table 1). Out of six, two showed their willingness to participate in the study.

2. Participants

Study abroad is a powerful experience that can shape and change the learners’ L2 beliefs

\(^2\) Transferability, which is sometimes also referred to as comparability, assigns the responsibility to readers to determine whether there is congruence, fit, or connection between one study context, in all its richness, and their own context, rather than having the original researchers make that assumption for them (Duff, 2008, p. 51).
as well as their L2 learning motivation (Allen, 2010; Allen & Tae-Young Kim, 2010; Amuzie & Winke, 2009). To gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamic role of learner beliefs in L2 learning, two SA ESL students, Seon-Hee and Jane (both pseudonyms), are analyzed in this paper. As shown in Table 1, the two learners had commonalities in terms of the educational background (English-related major), age (in their mid-twenties), gender (female), and the region visited (North America).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Profiles</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Undergraduate Major</th>
<th>Place of SA</th>
<th>Duration of SA</th>
<th>Official English Score (Before-After SA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seon-Hee</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>English education</td>
<td>Alberta, Canada</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>TOEIC (750-860)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>English studies</td>
<td>Ohio, USA</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>TOEFL CBT (280-N/A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seon-Hee participated in the study-abroad program with the belief that authentic exposure to an L2 would guarantee higher L2 proficiency. Note that she was good at Japanese martial arts, Karate. After having experienced isolation from L2 academic discourse because of the lack of L2 proficiency, Seon-Hee joined a Karate club at a local university in Canada. In the club, she enjoyed constant and meaningful interactions with native English speakers. Seon-Hee commented that those immediate and favorable contexts enabled her to sustain L2 learning motivation after coming back to Korea.

Jane, the other participant, also believed that exposure to L2 input-rich contexts would increase her L2 proficiency. At first, the fear of losing face in front of native English speakers made Jane attend L2 classes in a passive manner and eventually resulted in her silence during the language class. Although Jane was exposed to various L2 input, she did not fully appreciate such opportunities. From the first month, she shared a house with international students, but different lifestyles did not afford sufficient opportunities for Jane to have solid relationships with them.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain credibility in data analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), three complementary sources were used: semi-structured interviews, language learning autobiographies, and

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3 Jane's post-SA TOEFL score could not be obtained because she did not take the test again after returning from SA. According to the TEPS official website (2010), the TOEFL CBT score of 280 is equivalent to the score of 950 in TOEIC.
stimulated recall tasks.

Before the three sources of data were collected, the participants completed a background profile soliciting basic information about them: gender, age, the academic background (college major), and the length of time spent in SA for L2 learning. Along with this basic information, the participants were asked to note their L2-related experiences in SA, their prior L2 learning experiences, and the most (un)pleasant moments during the SA period. Occasionally, the answers were used to elicit responses during interview sessions.

Alanen (2003) stated that L2 learners simultaneously shape and consolidate their beliefs, ideas, or knowledge while speaking or writing and are able to express most of their unique L2 learning experience under the interviewer’s prompts. Thus, among these three complementary sources of data, the interview method was selected as the main research data, and the other sources were used to corroborate the research findings. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour at a time and place convenient to the participants (see the Appendix for sample interview questions). After transcribing the digitized audio files, the participants were emailed to check the accuracy of the transcripts, and they confirmed the correctness. When either the researchers or the participants were uncertain about the transcription, follow-up clarifying questions were sent via e-mail to the participants.

Stimulated recall tasks were also employed to facilitate the learners’ unique L2 learning experiences. Gass and Mackey (2000, p. 17) advocated the use of stimulated recalls by stating that “it is assumed that some tangible (perhaps visual or aural) reminder of an event will stimulate recall of the mental processes in operation during the event itself.” Thus, the participants were required to bring meaningful photos that were taken during their SA L2 learning process (cf. Tae-Young Kim, 2007). As photos or diaries posted on the participants’ personal web blogs might have captured their unique day-to-day L2 learning experiences, when necessary, with the participants’ prior consent, the diaries uploaded to their personal blogs (e.g., commercial websites such as Cyworld or Facebook) were eclectically used.

The interview data as well as other triangulating data were analyzed based on the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As we used qualitative analyses, thematic categories gradually emerged from three sequential coding phases. That is, one of the authors coded the related topics commented by the participants first. Then, by iteratively re-reading the interview transcripts for the purpose of selective coding, we elaborated on the relations among the initial coding strips while pruning or adding categories. For the final phase, axial coding was made based on the relevance of the themes the current paper focused on. After finalizing the coding process, the participants were invited to check how well the coded themes reflected their SA experience and L2 learning beliefs. Through this member-checking process, the validity and credibility of the data were confirmed. All interviews were conducted in Korean and the data presented in
this paper were translated into English. In order to check the inter-coder reliability, the researchers in this study hired a specialist with an MA degree in applied linguistics; she coded all the interview data independently, which resulted in the inter-coder percentage of agreement of 0.91.

IV. FINDINGS

In this section, Seon-Hee’s and Jane’s qualitatively different learning trajectories are described. As stated above, their beliefs underwent changes throughout the SA period in North America. A point of interest is how and why the two learners’ L2 beliefs played such a differential role in L2 community participation.

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained: Seon-Hee’s Story

Interview Excerpt 1: October 23, 2009

65. Seon-Hee (S): …At first, I was not able to communicate with them [native L2 speakers] because of the lack of L2 proficiency, which was terribly frustrating. But as I gradually became close to them at the Karate club, English was no longer an object of study but a medium for meaningful communication with others. Now I really enjoy learning English.

Seon-Hee’s Life History and L2 Beliefs

Seon-Hee took part in an SA program in 2006. Even though Seon-Hee had aspired to become an English teacher, which would have corresponded to her college major (i.e., English education), compared with other students, her relatively low self-perceived L2 proficiency was always a matter of concern for her. In this quagmire, she came to think of SA with the help of a friend who had participated in a similar SA program in the U.S. in 2005. As a large number of her classmates had already completed a student exchange program, it seemed natural for Seon-Hee to contemplate on the possibility of SA. After thinking of possible destinations, Seon-Hee decided to leave for Canada because she liked the country’s multiculturalism and lower cost of living in comparison with the U.S.

According to Seon-Hee’s language learning autobiography, she believed that the first

4 In recollecting her embarrassment when she was not able to respond to an L2 instructor’s question during an SA program in her first months, Seon-Hee stated that “those experiences in Korea made me more demotivated to learn English. For the first several months, whatever I did, I was not able to take the burden off from English, even in Canada.” (Interview with Seon-Hee, October 23, 2009)
and foremost way of improving L2 proficiency was through having “authentic” conversations with native L2 speakers. Thus, Seon-Hee took English conversation classes at a private ESL school in Korea before going abroad to maximize the effect of L2 learning abroad.

Before she went to Canada, she visited China to learn Chinese martial arts in the summer of 2005. Although Seon-Hee did not have L2 proficiency in Chinese, her unique interest in Chinese martial arts provided ample opportunities to make local friends within a short period of time. This experience positively affected Seon-Hee’s sojourn in Canada, strengthening her belief that sharing one’s skills or hobby with the local people was the quickest way to make L2 speaking friends.

**Changes in L2 Beliefs and Karate Club Participation**

After her arrival in Alberta, Canada, Seon-Hee endeavored to find various ways to have extended, authentic communication with L2 speakers as she had expected in Korea. Contrary to the expectation, however, such an opportunity was not easily found. The lack of L2 proficiency made her silent both in and out of class, sometimes making Seon-Hee regret her decision to come to Canada.

*Interview Excerpt 2:*

22. Interviewer (I): In retrospect, when was the most difficult time in your study abroad period?
23. S: Uh (...) for the first three months, I remained silent and spent most of time at home. Well, at first, I was not able to say a word because I hardly understood what they [Canadians] were saying.

As shown in Excerpt 2, Seon-Hee had difficulty in adjusting herself to the new L2 environment, spending most of the day at home. However, with the help of her Canadian roommate, Seon-Hee found some opportunities to participate in other local communities. Although she thought that Canadians were unapproachable because of their different lifestyle, participating in a housewarming party with her roommate was a good opportunity to meet new local Canadians.

*Interview Excerpt 3:*

81. S: I was able to meet as many native L2 speakers as I wanted for one month…I always used the same language pattern and structure with the same words. And that’s all. No more improvement. So I came to realize that I had to study English grammar to try out various sentences in extended, authentic conversations… Also, yeah, I thought it [socializing with others] might not have been the best
way for those who had not yet reached a certain threshold level of L2 proficiency.

As shown in Excerpt 3, while trying to socialize with many native L2 speakers, Seon-Hee gradually came to realize that her previous beliefs about effective L2 learning were not compatible with her. Accordingly, her beliefs about L2 learning began to change; what mattered was the quality of conversation by using various language forms through authentic conversations with L2 local members. Note that Seon-Hee started studying English grammar for the sake of communication, which she had not previously emphasized.

While studying English grammar, she explored another possibility to have constant relations with local L2 members. This time, Seon-Hee strategically joined a Japanese martial arts (Karate) club where she easily achieved old-timer status with relatively little effort. As she had a talent for martial arts, her superb performance was sufficient to attract other local members’ attention. Thus, Seon-Hee was able to establish solid relationships with native L2 speakers in the community. In Excerpt 4, Seon-Hee proudly recollected her elevated status in the Karate club.

*Interview Excerpt 4:*

69. S: Actually, my foreign friends were very open-minded to the Asian culture because they’re learning Karate... They asked a lot about Chinese martial arts, and I responded with insufficient English, which I was not ashamed of at all. I think I was warmly welcomed there. And it was very easy and natural for me to get along with them.

While actively taking part in club activities such as the National Karate Competition in Canada, she successfully positioned herself as a legitimate member of the club. As commented in Excerpt 4, her insufficient L2 proficiency did not matter for it was shaded by her Karate skills. Thenceforth, throughout her SA period in Canada, Seon-Hee enjoyed a sense of membership in the community, consolidating relationships with local Canadian club members. This is well represented in Excerpt 5 below.

*Interview Excerpt 5:*

73. I: When do you think was the happiest moment during the study-abroad period?  
76. S: ... Well, I’d say that’s when they hugged me wherever I met them. When they no longer regarded me as a foreigner and thought of me as a friend—that was the happiest moment, I think.
The sense of strong membership in the local community empowered Seon-Hee to keep her composure even in face-threatening L2 use-related situations. When miscommunication occurred during the conversation, Seon-Hee no longer remained silent; instead, she took advantage of every resource she could find to express herself to the L2 speakers. The intermittent corrective feedback on her L2 usage from her local Canadian friends was not perceived as face-threatening any longer because the feedback was based on the close relationship between Seon-Hee and her friends. With these friends, Seon-Hee tried to use English expressions and sentences she had studied at the library. Seon-Hee stated that she was not embarrassed or humiliated during such comfortable but brave trials in the community of practice; rather, she felt that such opportunities allowed her to check her L2 progress. Compared with Excerpt 2, which describes her passive attitude in the initial SA period, Excerpt 6 shows Seon-Hee’s improved strategy to take initiative in communicating with L2 native speakers.

Interview Excerpt 6:
137. S: If you are angry at someone, you must first say “I am angry,” rather than “that’s OK.” How can Koreans speak English as well as native L2 speakers do? But you have to express yourself at any cost...

138. I: Was there a strategy behind your communication with your L2 friends?
139. S: Well... I wrote letters quite frequently (laughing). One day, my Canadian friend told me that his mom was very sick... I tried to console him, but I wasn’t able to think of appropriate words. All I said was “I’m so sorry to hear that”... so I wrote him a letter saying that some time ago, I had a similar experience...things like that.

Other than the Karate club, Seon-Hee volunteered at a local nursing home where she believed that she could have meaningful and constant interactions with local L2 people. While helping out with the seniors at the nursing home, she achieved a strong sense of membership in the local community. Again, her efforts contributing to the community were appreciated by the local L2 members (i.e., seniors and volunteers). As a result, the experiences provided Seon-Hee with strong motivation to learn English not as a subject to study or master but as a medium legitimizing her existence in the SA community. Not only did Seon-Hee achieve higher English test scores in comparison with those in the pre-SA period (see Table 1), but more importantly, she began to enjoy learning English after she completed her SA, which was based on her realization that English, like her Korean, was a tool for earning membership status through legitimate peripheral participation in meaningfully perceived communities. At the time of data collection, Seon-Hee was preparing for an exam to work at an international organization.
In sum, Seon-Hee’s L2 beliefs played a facilitative role in sustaining her L2 learning efforts in the SA context. At first, she had a vague belief about L2 learning through SA, thinking that maximum exposure to L2 input would be helpful for her L2 learning. However, through her participation in various L2 communities, first for the purpose of socializing with others and then of gaining legitimate membership at the martial arts club and the nursing home, she came to formulate an alternative L2 learning belief in which L2 learning was not a solo activity of acquiring a linguistic knowledge system but the inevitable consequence of meaningful participation in the communities of practice. Seon-Hee’s alternative L2 learning belief was consolidated and internalized with the help of her L2 communities (e.g., the Karate club and the local senior nursing home). In this gradual process of L2 learning belief re-structuring, Seon-Hee was able to sustain her L2 motivation throughout and after the sojourn period.

**It Is Easy to Despise What You Cannot Get: Jane’s Story**

*Interview Excerpt 7: October 26, 2009*

89. Jane (J): Many people say that ESL is good... but good for what? For some, an EFL context like Korea could be a better place for L2 learning...I’d suggest that in terms of English learning, think before going abroad whether you are an EFL- or ESL-oriented learner.

90. Interviewer (I): So, how about you? Do you think an EFL environment is more beneficial to you to learn English?

91. J: To some extent, definitely.

**Jane’s Life History and L2 Beliefs**

Jane began her SA in the U.S., anticipating that unlimited L2 participation would be freely given at her disposal. Like Seon-Hee, the fact that most of her close friends had already experienced overseas L2 learning strongly motivated Jane to go abroad for L2 learning. In a sense, Jane’s prior L2 learning experience in Korea influenced her high expectations. Jane’s L2 learning was based mainly on her public and private language school experience, which, in her opinion, did not provide meaningful opportunities for L2 communication. In addition, as she had no overseas experience, Jane’s SA to the U.S. was full of expectations in terms of L2 learning as well as exotic adventures.

In 2005, as she was preparing for TOEFL to acquire international student status, Jane happened to help an American student studying in Korea and gradually built a friendship with her. Through this anecdotal, personal experience, Jane thought that she became familiar with various cultural practices of the U.S., which made her feel more confident about her SA preparation.
Marginalization and Changes in L2 Learning Beliefs

As Norton (2000) indicated, language learning is not the acquisition of abstract skills that are transmitted from one context to another. It is a socially constructed practice that involves the projection of L2 learner identities in complex and contradictory ways. As stated above, Jane did not have any SA experience before coming to the U.S.; English learning Jane experienced in Korea was mostly related to individual self-study, although she had built a friendship with an American student. In a foreign language context, one’s language identity does not alter much compared with that in the SA or immigration context (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). In this regard, as she achieved a high TOEFL score in Korea, before her departure for the U.S., Jane regarded herself as a competent L2 learner without involving much identity negotiation; that is, her identity was firmly rooted in the Korean context.

However, despite Jane’s high TOEFL score and her initial expectations of being immersed in L2 input-rich contexts, the opportunities to speak in front of other L2 learners as well as native English speakers in the U.S. matched none of these. As shown in Excerpts 8 and 9, Jane stated frustrating moments when negotiating her L2 competence with L2 local members both in and out of class.

*Interview Excerpt 8:*

56. J: (...) always worried a lot about making mistakes. I always thought of what I was going to say before speaking out in class. It was really stressful. I think I lost a lot of turns.
57. I: How did you cope with the situation?

*Interview Excerpt 9:*

111. J: I went to Victoria’s Secret (...). At first, it was fine, but soon, I had difficulty in communicating with the clerk about getting a refund for a product that I bought online ... I was definitely ignored. I felt that she was laughing at me, although she did not say any more. I thought she ignored me because I was a foreigner with limited L2 proficiency... It was such a shameful experience...

It is noteworthy that Jane remained silent in such circumstances. This differs from Seon-Hee, who utilized every resource available to her to acquire legitimate status in the SA community. As such, it is worthwhile to investigate the following question: *Why did Jane decide not to participate, whereas Seon-Hee did so?*

Jane’s changed L2 beliefs provide a clue. As stated above, she had a firm belief that ESL contexts would be beneficial to her in increasing L2 proficiency. However, the continued frustration she experienced regarding L2 participation led her to change her L2 learning
beliefs: Every L2 learner may not benefit from SA contexts (see Excerpt 7). Jane’s imagined, idealized community was an academic one where her academic knowledge as well as her high L2 proficiency (mostly related to the TOEFL score) would be highly appreciated by L2 community members in SA contexts. Contrary to her expectations, however, the difficulties in securing legitimate participant status in the SA L2 community dissuaded her to make further efforts for L2 learning.

Moreover, Jane’s high TOEFL score was one of the collaborating factors for the change in her L2 learning beliefs. In the university where Jane studied, a certain level of TOEFL scores was required to take regular undergraduate courses. Whereas most international students progressed from a series of ESL courses to regular undergraduate courses, Jane’s extraordinary TOEFL score was sufficient to allow her to take regular courses immediately, which was exceptional for the university. Thus, when native English speakers there failed to acknowledge her L2 proficiency and academic knowledge, which were average at best from the local student viewpoint, Jane began to question her previous L2 beliefs regarding the beneficial effects of SA experience on L2 proficiency enhancement, refusing to be relegated into an incompetent stranger (cf. Norton, 2000). As a consequence, as illustrated in Excerpt 10, her alternative counter-belief afterwards did not motivate Jane to enjoy L2-rich SA contexts.

Interview Excerpt 10:

113. J: When I went to a shopping mall with my American friends at school, I didn’t need to say a lot. As the U.S. is such a multiethnic society, I thought they [the clerks] would regard me as just a normal Asian-American. I really hated being labelled a “foreigner.”

In addition to taking undergraduate classes at the designated university, Jane participated in other L2 communities of practice such as working at a Korean-owned restaurant. As previously stated, she had quite high L2 proficiency. This was enough to allow her to work as a server, which gave her more opportunities to converse with native L2 speakers. However, her insensitivity regarding new L2 input and the changed beliefs did not stimulate her to appreciate these L2 learning SA opportunities. Other extracurricular activities such as swimming or yoga did not provide Jane with constant verbal interaction opportunities with other L2 members, which was sharply inconsistent with Seon-Hee’s situation.

After returning from abroad, Jane stated that she had not taken official L2 exams such as TOEIC or TOEFL (see Table 1). It seemed that Jane did not show much interest toward L2 learning as much as she did before the SA. When asked about the reason for not taking exams (during the follow-up e-mail correspondence), Jane replied that “well, I’d say
taking such exams [TOEFL] is no longer necessary” (personal communication, December 28, 2009).

To summarize, Jane had believed that studying English in the SA context would be helpful in enhancing L2 proficiency, especially speaking ability. However, she did not venture to participate in the communities where meaningful communication occurred. Instead, a couple of embarrassing and even humiliating experiences both in and out of class made her change her L2 beliefs. Jane became insensitive to various L2 input, missing a variety of opportunities to utilize L2-rich SA experience. Compared with Seon-Hee, Jane’s lack of meaningful L2 communities, where her legitimate peripheral participation could have been secured, changed her L2 beliefs, resulting in the attenuation of L2 learning motivation.

V. DISCUSSION

Learners are continually in the state of flux in creating, evaluating, and revising their self-image, and sometimes, they refuse identity negotiation by opting not to speak out (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). As described above, although the two participants believed that the new SA context would be helpful in learning English, their similar L2 learning beliefs were subjected to important changes, resulting in differential L2 learning behaviors. In addition, Seon-Hee still maintained her L2 beliefs as well as motivation after the study abroad experience, whereas Jane’s L2 beliefs were abandoned and her efforts to learn the L2 commensurately withered.

Seon-Hee’s and Jane’s L2 learning beliefs can be explained by using Wenger’s (1998) three modes of belonging (i.e., engagement, imagination, and alignment). First, both participants’ L2 learning beliefs are related to the mode of imagination because like many other SA students, they created an ideal SA context where all local English speakers around them would be willing to support their L2 development throughout their sojourn. Jane, for instance, created positive expectations of SA experience; she imagined participating in idealized SA contexts where most local English speakers would appreciate her high English proficiency (in TOEFL) and her academic knowledge. However, soon after their initial settlement in the SA environment, Seon-Hee and Jane showed different trajectories in the mode of belonging. For Seon-Hee, her L2 beliefs regarding effective L2 learning started from participating in ESL classes as well as a variety of social meetings where visitors, regardless of their mother tongue, conversed in English in an informal manner. This period relates to the mode of engagement for the gatherings’ confinement to time and place. As Seon-Hee thought such socializing would not enhance her L2 proficiency, she decided to change her mode of belonging to alignment by participating in
the Karate club, where she projected her energies and efforts to regain legitimate membership. Her alignment is demonstrated in her investment of mental and physical energies to secure a sense of belonging to the SA community. For Seon-Hee, the aligned communities were the martial arts club and the nursing home. In sum, Seon-Hee’s mode of belonging went through imagination, engagement and eventually alignment.

Compared with Seon-Hee, Jane’s SA experience involved little alignment. Although Jane’s L2 learning beliefs were closely related to the mode of imagination, soon after realizing the disparity between her initial L2 learning beliefs and the SA context, she remained in the mode of superficial engagement, sometimes in the guise of local people (see Excerpt 10). Jane did not coordinate her energies and actions to the practices of the SA environment, and in this sense, her mode of belonging changed from imagination only to superficial engagement, not to alignment.

FIGURE 1
Wenger’s (1998, p. 167) Two Types of Non-Participation

Wenger (1998) also suggested the concept of non-participation as a form of participation and distinguished two types of non-participation: Peripherality and marginality. By peripherality, he meant a necessary step enabling the participation in the community whereas marginality is a form of non-participating detachment, which excludes the possibility of full participation. Figure 1 illustrates the directionalities of peripherality and marginality. Although both learners had a similar timespan of SA for L2 learning, their L2 learning experience cannot be considered as the same L2 learning activity. Seon-Hee’s efforts regarding L2 learning in Canada can be viewed as a dynamic endocentric process representing peripherality, whereas Jane’s non-participation is the sign of marginality, indicating an exocentric tendency toward outside of the SA context.

With regard to these contrasting cases, it is noteworthy to delve into the role of learner beliefs as a mediation tool in L2 learning (Alanen, 2003; Tae-Young Kim, 2007, 2008). As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argued, the proper internalization of a mediational tool explains the dialectical relations between individuals and the world. That is, if L2 learners were to
internalize their beliefs as an enabling meditational tool, they would make use of various resources to control and regulate their L2 learning. If not, they would modify L2 learning beliefs and learning activities (Lantolf & Genung, 2002). However, Jane's case shows another possibility; if learners do not change L2 learning beliefs even after recognizing a disparity between their L2 beliefs and learning contexts, the extant L2 belief can function as an ineffective mediational tool and result in limited L2 community participation even if the learners change the mode of belonging from imagination to engagement. By contrast, in Seon-Hee's case, her prior foreign language experience in China helped her to internalize her beliefs about effective L2 learning, making it easier for her to adjust to a new SA context and understand the communities of practice by progressively changing her mode of belonging from imagination to engagement and eventually to alignment. Depending on the mediational potential of their L2 learning beliefs, the participants either remained in the mode of engagement (Jane) or ventured to create the mode of alignment (Seon-Hee). From Seon-Hee's and Jane's cases, we can understand that that exposure to the SA context per se does not guarantee L2 learners the same sense of personal success. Instead, based on the internalization of their L2 beliefs as a mediational tool, they took different leaning trajectories and adopted different modes of belonging.

VI. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

To date, prior research in SLA has generally conceived L2 learning beliefs as fixed, static in nature and as an entity that can be measured by questionnaires with statistical procedures (e.g., Horwitz, 1987, 1988). However, as Dufva (2003) argued, it may be a mistake to analyze beliefs without carefully considering the sociocultural milieu they occur in because "whatever individuals believe is a consequence of the series of interactions they have been involved and discourses they have been exposed to" (p. 135).

By taking Wenger's (1998) modes of belonging and the SCT perspective (Alanen, 2003; Tae-Young Kim, 2008, 2009), this paper shows that when L2 learning beliefs successfully mediate between the subject (the learner) and the object (L2 learning), learners strive to align themselves to a variety of SA communities for the purpose of claiming legitimate peripheral participant status. In addition, the results of the study indicate that learner beliefs are intricately related to the mode of belonging. As underscored in Seon-Hee's and Jane's data, L2 learners' non-participation fulfills dual functions: peripherality and marginality. The former is a preparatory step to claim legitimate membership in the SA community, whereas the latter is a sense of emotional detachment from the community.

This study has the following educational implications. As noted, there are pervasive beliefs among Korean L2 learners that the L2 input-rich SA context would be optimal to
improve L2 proficiency (Tae-Young Kim, 2008, 2009; EunSil Lee, 2009). However, the results of the current study suggest that even if L2 learners are exposed to such contexts, unless their willingness to participate in L2 learning is taken into action through an appropriate mode of belonging to the SA community, the learners may not necessarily enjoy a high level of personal success in the L2. Thus, an L2 learner’s volitional engagement in various communities of practice should be followed for desirable SA experience.

This paper shows the role of learner beliefs through multiple sources of data triangulation. Nonetheless, to capture the fluctuating learner beliefs and L2 learning activities, longitudinal, qualitative research should be adopted. In addition, learners’ personality factors need to be considered in future research because these factors may affect L2 learners’ differential participation in SA communities. In fact, it is not the intention of this study to dichotomize one of the two learners into a success and the other a failure; rather, the study intends to reveal the dynamic nature of L2 beliefs and their role in L2 learning participation. Therefore, future research employing multi-layered, mixed method analysis is warranted to examine L2 learners exhibiting a variety of unique personal histories.

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APPENDIX
Sample Interview Questions

1. Background information
   1) When did you visit the country? How did you choose the target country?
   2) What was the purpose of the study abroad? (Do you have any specific plans?) Have you reached the goal?
   3) What did you expect before going abroad? What kind of things did you prepare for your L2 learning?
   4) What things come to your mind when someone mentions the target country?
   5) Briefly summarize your sojourn experience.

2. Study-abroad L2 learning experience
   1) How was your daily routine there?
   2) How were your relations with other people? Did you get along with other Korean ESL students/L2 local students?
   3) In terms of L2 learning, when was the most challenging/happiest moment during the sojourn period?
   4) In terms of relations with other people, when was the most challenging/happiest moment during the sojourn period?

3. L2 beliefs, attitudes toward L2 communities, and L2 motivation
   1) Are you satisfied with the L2 outcomes you achieved?
   2) What kinds of efforts did you make for your English learning?
   3) What do you think is needed for successful study-abroad L2 learning?

4. Picture-cued stimulated recall
   1) Why did you bring this picture? In what way is it important to your L2 learning?
   2) Please describe this picture in detail.

Applicable levels: tertiary
Key words: Study-Abroad, L2 learner Beliefs, Participation, Mode of Belonging, Community, Qualitative Method

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