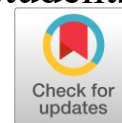


Reconceptualising the silent period: Stories of Japanese students studying abroad

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to reconceptualise the silent period from the perspective of situated learning theory to understand how it is experienced by adult second language (L2) learners during study abroad. The silent period has largely been regarded as a cognitive phenomenon during which some beginning L2 learners are unwilling or unable to produce the language they are learning. It initially attracted attention in relation to Krashen's Input Hypothesis but, even though a number of studies were carried out in the 1970s and 80s, they have not been followed up, leaving a number of questions unanswered. Furthermore, these studies did not take into account the perspective of the learners who experienced the silent period. In the present study, I conducted life-story interviews with Japanese university students who experienced a silent period during their study abroad. As a result, it was found that their silence was related to their inhibitions resulting from insufficient self-expression in the target language. The study suggests that the silent period is not to be seen as a period of incomprehension, rejection, or abandonment of learning but a site of struggle and a pathway to finding new ways for self-expression and participation in the new language.



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1.1. Introduction Toward reconceptualisation of the silent period from a situated learning perspective

In this paper, I aim to reconceptualise the silent period in adult second language (L2) learners from a situated learning perspective through analysis of life stories of Japanese students who reported experiencing a silent period during their study abroad. The silent period is defined as 'a span of time of varying length, during which some beginning L2 learners do not willingly produce the language they are learning' (Granger, 2004:1-2). It initially attracted attention as a grounding for S. D. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982; 1985), and a number of studies were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s. These early studies mostly investigated silence observed in children learning an L2 at the initial stage of L2 acquisition and considered it as a cognitive phenomenon related to the development of learners' abilities for comprehension and production of the L2 (See 2.1 for more details). However, even though it is recognised as a commonly experienced phenomenon in L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1994), the concept of the silent period remains largely unconfirmed (Bao, 2019). Ishizaki (1993; 1997) argued that, especially with adult L2 learners, it ought not to be regarded as merely a cognitive phenomenon and we need to take into account other aspects

including affective factors. Furthermore, Umino's (2011) study of international students studying abroad in Japan indicated that learners' silence (or state of not speaking) may also relate to a lack of opportunities for speaking as well as limitations of their abilities. International students in that study reported that their production of the target language (Japanese) was extremely reduced during the first year of study abroad in Japan as in the extracts below (Umino, 2011).

KYM, Korean: There were many Koreans at the school, so I spoke in Korean except during lessons. The teacher was the only Japanese person around. I did not speak a word of Japanese outside of class during the one year of preparatory education. I did not mix with my classmates because I thought I could not go on to university if I did.

LSG, Chinese (Korean): I had no Japanese friends and had no opportunity to speak Japanese. The school was in Shinookubo (a Korean ethnic community) in Tokyo and I went to church there. There were Koreans everywhere and I spoke in Korean. Most of the students of the school were Korean or Chinese. I could not speak Japanese until after I finished school.

Even though these students are in a 'naturalistic learning environment' (Spolsky, 1989), they have very few opportunities to participate in various activities using the target language (TL), and this may be related to the cause of their silence. Based on the above considerations, in this study I attempt to understand the silent period of students studying abroad from a situated learning perspective which places participation as the central process of learning. Using life-story interviews, I aim to understand the learners' perspectives of what they experienced during their silent period, why they fell into silence, and how they broke out of it.

1.2. The silent period as a cognitive phenomenon

As mentioned above, a significant number of studies identifying a silent period in L2 acquisition were reported in the 1970s and the 1980s. Some of these were cases of children who did not speak the L2 for a certain period at the initial stage of L2 acquisition (Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Hakuta, 1974, 1976; Huang, 1978) and others were cases of adults (Hanania & Gradman, 1977). In these studies, the role of the silent period was regarded as a period for building listening competence and concentrating on comprehension rather than language production (Dulay, 1982). The studies also suggested that a silent period is not obligatory (i.e. does not occur in all learners) (Naiman et al., 1978; Gibbons, 1985) and the degree of silence and the length of the silent period is not fixed.

Learners considered to be in the silent period are not necessarily literally 'silent'. Dulay et al. (1982) and Krashen (1982; 1985) regarded learners who produced formulaic speech but did not produce creative speech as being in the silent period. Moreover, in a study in which pin microphones were individually attached to children studying English as an L2, Saville-Troike revealed that the children who did not speak to other people generated private speech and, based on these results, concluded that the silent period is a time in which the children's interactive speech of the L2 was dramatically reduced (Saville-Troike, 1988). This is in accordance with Gibbons' interpretation of the silent period as a 'reduced-output period' (Gibbons, 1985).

While Itoh and Hatch (1978) interpreted the silent period negatively as a 'rejection period' and Gibbons (1985) as a period of 'incomprehension', Krashen (1982; 1985) and Saville-Troike (1988) interpreted it positively as a stage in which the learners build up language ability in preparation for later speech production. In particular, it served as powerful evidence for Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) which claimed that gaining comprehensible input could be a determining factor for acquisition to occur. Based on this hypothesis it was proposed that verbal drills should be delayed in teaching methods such as the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). But as the influence of Krashen's theory has decreased, the issue of the silent period has drawn little attention. Although it has been pointed out that the learner's silence does not necessarily indicate low competence and could have many different functions during L2 acquisition, research on the silent period has not been followed up. The issue of silence in general remains a neglected area in L2 research (King & Harumi, 2020) and many issues have been left unresolved.

1.3. The silent period as seen from a psychoanalytic perspective

More recently, Granger (2004) has attempted to understand the affective aspects of the silent period from a psychoanalytic perspective, opening up a new approach. Granger (2004) argues that the silent period of L2 acquisition is different in nature from that of first language (L1) acquisition. Silence in the former should not be regarded as a matter of literal silence of not producing words.

Rather, it should be understood as a matter of silence of the 'self' or not being able to express the self in the L2. Granger analyses autobiographies of people who went to live overseas as immigrants (Rodriguez, 1988; Hoffman, 1989). Those authors reported that they became silent because they were unable to express their original selves. The problem here is the 'silence of the self' which cannot be expressed adequately in the new language. If we use the psychoanalytic framework, this kind of silence should be interpreted as a symptom of the conflict that arises when undergoing the transition from one's L1 self to one's L2 self.

Although Granger's approach is thought-provoking, it does not account adequately for any contextual factors which could be the causes of this kind of conflict. Furthermore, since identity in L2 is a product of negotiation, it is fluid, context-dependent, and constantly shifting in nature (Hall, 1966). Moreover, the case studies presented by Granger are all limited to published autobiographies of learners who went to live overseas as immigrants. The present paper builds on Granger's work but puts focus on the social and contextual aspects surrounding the students studying abroad based on the empirical data.

1.4. The silent period as seen from a situated learning perspective

In this paper, I attempt to interpret 'silence' from the perspective of participation. In the situated learning theory proposed by Wenger (Wenger, 1998) learning is regarded as a process of social participation. Participation here refers 'not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities' (Wenger, 1998:6-7). Lave and Wenger (1991) propose the notion of a community of practice (COP) which is 'a set of relations among persons, activity and world' (Lave & Wenger, 1991:98) as a way to theorise and investigate social contexts. In order for L2 learners to learn through social participation, learners must be allowed entry to communities of practice by means of legitimate peripheral participation.

This peripheral participation is achieved via exposure to 'mutual engagement with other members, to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise, and their repertoire in use' (Wenger, 1998:4). The repertoire of a COP is a resource used for the negotiation of meaning and includes 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions of concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence, and which have become part of its practice' (Wenger, 1998:83). However, as Wenger points out, 'in order to be on an inbound trajectory, newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members' (Wenger, 1998). Thus, participation must always begin peripherally and if the learner chooses not to participate as a form of resistance, then it might not begin at all.

A number of studies interpreting second language acquisition based on this theory have been published (Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000, 2001; Willet, 1995; Toohey, 2000; Miller, 2003). Miller uses a case study of immigrants in Australian high schools to discuss the relationship between 'speaking' and 'participation' and points out that 'for most high school students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), establishing new networks and finding a place and a voice in new settings is part of the linguistic and social identity work which must be done, and learning and speaking English is a vital part of this process' (Miller, 2003:2). Miller also asserts that L2 acquisition is essentially the process in which the learners find a new identity for themselves in order to be recognised as legitimate members or speakers in that society. If speaking mediates the process of participation, 'silence' or avoiding the activity of 'speaking' leads to the restriction of participation.

In fact, 'non-participation' is as important a factor in the formation of identity as participation. Wenger states that 'we not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through the practices we do not engage in. Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not. To the extent that we can come in contact with other ways of being, what we are not can even become a large part of how we define ourselves' (Wenger, 1998:164). Norton similarly interpreted the abandonment of participation in the English classroom by immigrant women in Canada as the phenomenon of 'non-participation' defined in relation to social identity constructed through social power relationships with members of the TL.

Based on the above discussion, in this paper I consider the silence of learners to be 'one form of restricted participation' and interpret the silent period as 'the period during which participation in practices using the TL is extremely restricted'.

1. The study

This study aims to understand the experience of the silent period by Japanese university students who studied abroad. I interviewed 12 Japanese students with experience of studying abroad. All the students majored in languages at a Japanese university.

The following three research questions were set for the study.

1. Do Japanese university students experience a silent period during study abroad?
2. If they do, what are some of the reasons for their silence?
3. How do learners break out of their silent period?

As Granger points out, it is not easy to study the silent period. Since a silent period is not necessarily experienced by all learners, it is difficult to predict in advance whether or not a certain learner will fall silent. Furthermore, even if the learners considered to have fallen into a silent period can be studied, it is not easy to draw out 'things not said' from 'people who do not speak' (Schmitz, 2022). Granger further observes that 'silence' is a process that is not consciously perceived when it is happening but is only understood after its passing. Taking these points into account, I used life-story interviews (Atkinson, 1998), which elicit the retrospective stories 'a person chooses to talk about the life he or she has lived' (Atkinson, 1998) with a focus on L2 learning.

Before the interviews, I asked the learners to fill out a questionnaire on their background information including study abroad details and the developmental stages they went through. Based on this information, I conducted semi-structured interviews to ask them about their L2 learning experiences chronologically. The topics included where, why, and how they studied and what happened during their study abroad. When the learners mentioned difficulties of speaking during study abroad, I asked probing questions to understand their experiences during their silent period. Audio recordings of the interviews were made and converted to written text to be analysed. Also, one of the learners, Haru, told me she kept a diary during her study abroad and offered to provide it as additional data. In the sections below, I attempt to understand the causes of the silent period and the strategies taken by the learners to break out of their silence. I also provide a case study of Haru: Haru kept a precise record of her emotions during her silent period. The analysis of her diary data as well as her interviews enable us to gain a deeper insight into this process. All the data was collected in Japanese. The extracts of the interview and the diary were translated into English by the author.

2. Results

3.1. Students experiencing the silent period during study abroad

As described above, if the learner mentioned they experienced a time during which spontaneous output with the TL was restricted, I identified this as a case of the silent period. Of the 12 students interviewed, 8 students reported experiencing a silent period of about three to six months (Table 1). Six students, Shin, Kenji, Haru, Yumi, Akane, and Miki stated that spontaneous language production of the TL and contact with TL speakers was almost completely restricted during that time. Two students (Yoko and Akira) reported that their production was restricted in specific situations or with specific conversational partners. The latter may be regarded as cases of 'partial silent period'. Of the six students who experienced the complete silent period, Miki started her study abroad as a complete beginner, having no prior instruction of the TL (Lithuanian). Thus, in her case, the issue of incomprehension is likely to have caused her silence. On the other hand, though the other five students had two years (over 400 hours) of prior instruction of the TL, they reported experiencing a silent period. In the sections below, in order to understand the causes of silence and how the students broke out of it, I present the overall findings of the eight students as well as a more detailed case study of Haru who submitted her diary data.

Table 1. Overview of the Learners Experiencing Silent Period

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Target language</i>	<i>Prior study of the TL</i>	<i>Country of study abroad</i>	<i>Period of study abroad</i>	<i>Perceived silent period</i>
1	Shin	24	Male	Korean	2 years	South Korea	13 months	Approx. 3 months
2	Kenji	24	Male	Spanish	2 years	Mexico	17 months	Approx. 3 months
3	Haru	22	Female	Portuguese	2 years	Portugal	12 months	Approx. 6 months
4	Yumi	23	Female	German	2 years	Germany	12 months	Approx. 4 months
5	Akane	30	Female	Tagalog	2 years	Philippines	10 months	Approx. 3 months
6	Miki	21	Female	Lithuanian	0 years	Lithuania	9 months	Approx. 4 months
7	Yoko	23	Female	English	8 years	United States	9 months	Approx. 6 months (partial)
8	Akira	23	Male	English	8 years	United States	11 months	Approx. 3 months (partial)
9	Rina	23	Female	Korean	2 years	Korean	10 months	none
10	Kazu	22	Male	Tagalog	2 years	Philippines	12 months	none
11	Moe	23	Female	English	9 years	United Kingdom	11 months	none
12	Hana	22	Female	English	10 years	United Kingdom	9 months	none

3.2. Experience of ‘restricted participation’

1) Haru’s story of silence

Haru studied abroad for 12 months at a university in Portugal. Even though she had studied Portuguese for 400 hours at a university in Japan prior to studying abroad, she had difficulties understanding what her conversational partners said during the first three months and felt she was unable to speak for approximately six months. This is the silent period perceived by Haru. At the university, she was placed into the advanced level class with mostly Spanish and Italian students which made it even more difficult to speak against whom she felt at a disadvantage. She shared a house with 12 other international students of various nationalities, including two Japanese students. One of them was Kyoko, a Japanese student fluent in both English and Portuguese. Kyoko helped Haru in various ways in her daily life but, ironically, Kyoko’s presence appeared to have been a factor in Haru’s silence. Kyoko spoke on her behalf and Haru never had a chance to speak for herself. Also, compared to Kyoko who was very fluent, Haru felt she could not express herself in Portuguese and was embarrassed to do so in front of Kyoko. Even though she considered herself to be a positive and forward-looking person in Japanese, in Portuguese she only appeared as a passive person without any opinions. She was unhappy about this state of affairs and lost her motivation to study.

In Haru’s diary, we see entries about her difficulties and words of encouragement toward herself. Table 2 summarises the major topics in Haru’s diary for the first three months.

Below is the diary entry she wrote on November 19. She expressed her difficulties of not being able to speak and her wish to try to overcome her problems by being more proactive.

November 19

I got up at 13:00. I was depressed that my Portuguese doesn’t get better. But I realised I was not trying hard enough. I was just passive. I was not trying hard to speak to others. I give up easily. I was just avoiding it. If I stay like this, nothing will change. Let's set a goal each day. Living with Kyoko is just an excuse. I think I am better than I think. It's only in my mind. I've been studying for two years now. I can do it. I can do it. I can do it! I will be able to do it. I don't have to blame myself. Let's start a new life, chapter two of study abroad.

Table 2. Haru's Diary Entries for the First Three Months in her Silent Period.

<i>Major topic</i>		<i>Summary</i>
1 st month		
Aug.29	Arrival in Lisbon	
Sept. 24	Trouble with Kyoko	It's hard to not be able to say what I want to say. It's hard with Kyoko around.
Sept. 26	Successful experience	I could talk a little bit with some people at the bar.
Sept. 27	Trouble with Kyoko	I don't know what to say to Kyoko there.
Sept. 28	Trouble	I couldn't talk with the teacher sitting next to me.
2 nd month		
Oct. 13	Trouble and encouraging herself	I felt insulted at the fancy dress party. Nothing is impossible. I can do it.
Oct. 17	Encouraging herself	I can do it.
Oct. 19	Trouble with Kyoko	Kyoko was talking in English with American friends. She was showing off.
3 rd month		
Nov. 2	Encouraging herself	Everyone wants confidence. I can do it.
Nov. 19	Encouraging herself	I was depressed my Portuguese is not getting better. I can do it.
Nov. 25	Encouraging herself	I get irritated. It's okay to make mistakes.
Nov. 27	Encouraging herself	I read a novel about a girl who solves her problems by herself. I want to solve my problem, too.

2) Causes of silence and restricted participation

We have seen that 'silence' may be interpreted as a form of 'restricted participation' from the situated learning perspective. Unlike immigrants in the previous studies by Norton (2000; 2001), Miller (2003), and by McKay and Wong (2000) who chose 'non-participation' as a way of resistance, the learners in this study had mastered the basics of the TL and willingly put themselves in a study abroad environment in order to improve their language abilities. But still, they only had limited access to opportunities for participation using the TL at the initial stage.

From the responses in the interviews, two factors that hindered their full participation emerged. The first factor is the learners' limited ability to use the TL. Having just transferred from a 'formal learning environment' to a 'natural language acquisition environment', the learners found it difficult to engage in spontaneous conversations.

a) Speed of natural conversation

I cannot pick up what my conversational partner is saying because it is too fast. <Shin, Korea>

I can't construct a sentence on the spot. <Kenji, Mexico>

I can understand what my conversational partner is saying, but I cannot answer on the spot <Akira, USA>.

Furthermore, they lacked the 'shared repertoire' to participate fully in the practices of the COPs. Below is the list of repertoire learners felt they needed in order to participate in conversations but that they lacked knowledge of.

b) Jokes

In the Philippines, you cannot become friends with anyone if you cannot make jokes in Tagalog. At first, I could not make jokes at all. <Akane, the Philippines>

c) Slang

I was not comfortable with the slang used by the male students sharing the house, and I could not reply in slang. <Yoko, USA>

d) Polite language

It was difficult to speak to a partner using polite language in Korean. <Shin, South Korea>

In the United States people speak to older people as equals without using polite language, so at first, I was bewildered. <Akira, USA>

I was not confident that I could use polite language well so I became unable to speak because I was afraid of being rude. <Akane, the Philippines>

e) *Complaints/ compliments*

I had the impression that in South Korea people frequently express dissatisfaction or say negative things, so at first, I was uncomfortable. <Shin, South Korea>

At first, I could not compliment women by telling them they are 'beautiful', etc. <Kenji, Mexico>

The second factor hindering learners' full participation is the avoidance of displaying inadequate self-expression. As we saw in [Section 3.1](#), Haru was silent because she was worried that she could not express her true self using Portuguese. This kind of fear about inadequate self-expression in the TL was also mentioned in the responses of other learners.

I can only use words I am familiar with (words I learned in the classroom), and I hated the idea of being thought of as the kind of person who can only use those kinds of words. <Akane, the Philippines>

I majored in Korean in Japan before studying abroad in South Korea so I was under such pressure to speak well and correctly that I became unable to speak. <Shin, South Korea>

I become unable to speak in front of the other more skillful Japanese students. The-Japanese students knew a lot about grammar so I started to be concerned about whether my grammar was correct. <Yumi, Germany>

I could not speak well if my conversational partner was an American woman. I felt intimidated. <Akira, USA>

I could not speak when I was trying to speak with native speakers. I was afraid that I would be seen as a childish person who uses unnatural English. <Yoko, USA>

With Asians, it was relatively easy to find common topics of conversation but with Germans, I could not find any common topics of conversation and did not know what I should talk about. <Yumi, Germany>

As we see in these remarks, sometimes the learners remained silent with specific types of conversational partners. The conversational partners most often cited as being 'difficult to speak to' were native speakers (Extract 14, 15). This is in common with the perceptions of the immigrant women in Norton's study. Conversely, many of the learners mentioned it was easy to speak to other international students, feeling that they were in an equal position of limited and inadequate self-expression (Extract 16). Some others mentioned that Japanese students, who were more skillful at the TL than themselves, stood out as being difficult to talk to (Extract 13). In the case study of Haru, Kyoko, who was more skillful than Haru, gave her a sense of inferiority and made her aware of her inadequate self-expression. This hindered Haru's active participation.

Harder has argued that silence is the 'response to gaps that may exist in an L2 learner's communicative potential based on the linguistic conventions accessible to that learner as well as on the invocation or actualisation of whichever of those accessible conventions might be useful as a given moment' (Harder, 1980:263). He also points out that most L2 learners have a 'sort of cut-off point for the reduction they will tolerate below which silence is preferable' and suggests that 'instead of seeing silence as the extreme point on the scale of message reduction, it can also be seen as the alternative to it' (Harder, 1980:263). We can further postulate that by choosing to be silent, learners fall into a kind of vicious circle: if learners cannot tolerate inadequate self-expression and choose to be silent, their participation becomes restricted. Because they do not participate in conversations, their speaking skills do not improve. As a result, they cannot express themselves adequately and so avoid speaking. We can summarise this vicious circle as follows:

1. The learner cannot express themselves adequately when speaking.
2. The learner chooses to be silent rather than tolerating inadequate self-expression.

3. The learner doesn't speak (silence).
4. Participation becomes restricted.
5. The learner's speaking skills do not improve.

Baldauf and Luke (1990) claim that language learning 'is like a club that strictly chooses its members: qualifications are needed to become a member but the necessary qualifications can only be obtained by becoming a member' (Baldauf & Luke, 1990:30). Learners who have fallen into the aforementioned vicious circle remain silent for a certain period of time (silent period). In this way, silence is both the cause and the result of restricted participation. Learners somehow need to break out of this vicious circle in order to find ways to fully participate in the social practices in the TL. In the following section, I discuss the stories of learners breaking out of this situation.

3.3. Breaking out of silence

1) Haru's story of participation

Haru tried to break this vicious circle in her fourth month by sharing her feelings frankly with Kyoko who had been identified as the major cause of her silence. Subsequently, she moved out of the house which she shared with Kyoko and moved into a new condominium with two Portuguese friends. Being freed from Kyoko who gave her a sense of inferiority, she gradually became able to speak. Furthermore, being away from her Japanese friends she started to go out with her Portuguese friends and managed to expand her circle of friends. In her ninth month, she made friends with some Portuguese people she met at a festival and gained a deeper understanding of their values. At about this time, she realised that she was no longer distinguishing between Portuguese and Japanese people. Just before returning to Japan, she stayed at a friend's house and realised that she was able to speak Portuguese. The friend's grandmother called Haru her 'granddaughter' and knitted a blanket for her. At this time, she finally felt that she had been accepted in Portugal. Toward the end of her study abroad, Haru had a chance to moderate a Japan-Portugal exchange event and was able to fulfill her role brilliantly. She could make interesting comments instantly and was quick-witted. After returning to Japan, she visited Portugal again. When her friend told her to come back any time, her feeling of being accepted was reassured.

In her diary entries for her fourth month (Table 3), Haru still writes about her troubles and words of self-encouragement, but there is a record of a turning point experience that happened on December 2nd.

Table 3. Haru's Diary Entries in Her Fourth Month

	Major Topic	Description
4 th month		
Dec. 2	Disclosing her feelings to Kyoko	I felt like something was going to explode.
Dec. 4	Trouble	I almost cried in my room.
Dec. 13	Successful experience	I was listening to my friends talking and I could understand almost everything.
Dec. 31	Successful experience	Sophia's mother told me I could come back to their house any time. I like her a lot.
Jan. 18	Encouraging herself	I can change the situation. Everything is up to me.
Jan. 21	Trouble with Kyoko	Why do I always look at bad things about Kyoko?

December 2nd

Mateo (a friend from Italy) went back to Italy. I was shocked. I am unstable recently. At dinner, there was no seat for me. I was standing and eating but nobody cared. Everyone was having a good time. I felt like something was going to explode. I ran into my room leaving Kyoko in the kitchen. I could not stand it. Something had gone wrong. I needed to break out of my shell.

After this incident, Haru disclosed her feelings to Kyoko and this enabled her to realise that the presence of Kyoko was the major cause of Haru's silence. Haru felt she could not express herself adequately in Portuguese while Kyoko could do so with ease. She felt embarrassed comparing herself to Kyoko, and this made her even more reticent about trying to speak and display her

insufficient self-expression. To overcome this embarrassment and break out of her silence, Haru felt she needed to get away from Kyoko. Soon after the incident, she decided to move out of the house. From her fifth month onwards, she stopped writing about her troubles and only noted down her plans and the amount of money spent. This indicates that her initial difficulties were largely resolved to a point where she no longer felt the need to write them out.

2) *The trajectory of participation*

In Haru's story, we can discern several important insights regarding how learners can break out of the vicious circle of silence and move toward participation. First, Haru removed the factor hindering her participation by separating herself from Kyoko. As a result, she could accept her inadequate self-expression and began to speak. Being away from her Japanese friends, she managed to expand her opportunities to use the TL. Her speaking skills improved which encouraged further participation. In the final stage of her study abroad, Haru felt that she had been accepted into the community of native speakers, and found a new identity. We can summarise this virtuous circle as follows.

1. The learner accepts inadequate self-expression.
2. The learner speaks.
3. Through speaking, opportunities for participation expand.
4. The learner becomes better at speaking.
5. The learner participates more fully.
6. The learner is accepted by the community of TL speakers and finds a new identity.

A similar change was observed in other learners. We have already seen that at the initial stage, the major opportunities for participation were limited to school and their place of residence. But as learners broke out of silence, their opportunities for participation gradually expanded (Table 4) which opened up contact with new people sharing common interests.

Table 4. Opportunities for Participation Using the TL During Study Abroad

Opportunities for participation	Specific examples
School classes	The language school, the university
Residence	Dormitories, boarding houses, house shares, homestays
Part-time jobs	Assisting with Japanese language education, being interviewed for a newspaper article, appearing in a TV commercial, interpreting
Social clubs	Squash, dancing, tennis, jazz, international exchange groups
Volunteering	Assisting with Japanese language classes, introducing Japanese culture, tandem learning, assisting the regional drama group, volunteering on a farm, working on environmental protection, volunteering in a nursing home
Travel	Travel inside and outside the country in which the learner studied
Others	Survey of a graduation thesis, a festival

Another factor that fostered more active participation is the acquisition of a 'shared repertoire' of their respective communities of practice. We can observe in the extracts below that the repertoires (see Section 3.2.) came to be shared by the learners toward the end of their study abroad.

At first, I couldn't make jokes in Tagalog at all but at the end of my time studying abroad I was able to make simple jokes. When speaking Tagalog, my friends stopped using 'kami' ('we' in an exclusive sense) and started using 'tayo' ('we' in an inclusive sense) so I had a strong sense of having been included in the group. <Akane, the Philippines>

In the United States people speak to older people as equals without using polite language, so at first, I was bewildered. In the end, it became easier to speak that way. <Akira, USA>

I had the impression that in South Korea people frequently express dissatisfaction or say negative things, so at first, I was uncomfortable. However, I became able to talk in the same way as my South Korean friends. <Shin, South Korea>

At first, I could not compliment women by telling them they are ‘beautiful’, etc., but now I can do it naturally without discomfort. <Kenji, Mexico>

At the same time, learners reported they gradually found new ways of self-expression using the TL (Table 5). In other words, they began to accept self-expression that was different from the self as expressed in their L1. These new identities developed through participation in the practices of the community of the TL and opened up a road to further participation.

Table 5. Learners’ New Ways of Self-Expression Using the TL

Student	Target language	New ways of self-expression
Shin	Korean	When I was speaking in Korean I turned into a strong personality and spoke in a loud voice. If you do not show a strong personality, you will be taken advantage of by your conversational partner.
Kenji	Spanish	When I was speaking in Spanish, I became cheerful and easy-going. My voice got louder. I made a lot of jokes. I stated my conclusion first before giving my reasons. The Portuguese version of me was easy-going towards people. I thought about what
Haru	Portuguese	I wanted to do and what I could do for people, rather than what people would do for me.
Yumi	German	I spoke candidly. I developed a tough personality. I stated what I wanted to say first.
Akane	Tagalog	In the Japanese language, I always worry about the people around me and I do not make jokes. In Tagalog, I am cheerful and make jokes.
Yoko	English	When I am speaking English, I am forward-looking, cheerful, and sociable. I can make simple jokes and laugh.
Akira	English	When I am speaking English, I am cheerful and make jokes. Even when meeting someone for the first time, I can speak frankly without worrying about losing face.

3) Turning point and learner agency

So how did the learners achieve the changes described above? The situations in which the learners were placed were different, but they all experienced a turning point and tackled the problem in their own ways to make a change in their respective situations.

I went travelling alone in order to force myself into a situation where I would have to do everything myself. <Kenji>

I started playing squash to increase the number of opportunities I had to speak to native speakers. <Shin>

I made a determined effort to say things that I had given up on because I thought I could not communicate them. <Haru>

I moved to a new residence to force myself into a situation where I had to speak to native speakers. <Haru, Akira, Akane>

I participated in volunteering in the region and so I began to have contact with native speakers. <Akira>

I started to go out with native speaker friends as much as I could. <Haru, Akane>

I went to my classes early and talked to the person sitting in the next seat. <Yumi>

I began tandem learning in which you are paired with a native speaker and you teach each other your respective native languages. <Shin, Kenji, Yumi>

I read the school bulletin board and participated in activities as much as I could. Also, I started to make social invitations to people myself. <Yumi>

I participated as a volunteer in Japanese language classes and so I began to have contact with native speakers who were interested in Japanese. <Shin, Kenji, Yumi, Akane, Yoko>

I became friends with a Lithuanian student at the dormitory. I tried to be with her most of the time and talk with her. <Miki>

From these extracts, we can discern that the learners made efforts to create new situations which allowed for more complete participation. This highlights the role of 'learner agency' in tackling the situation. Lantolf and Pavlenko argue that 'learners have to be seen as more than processing devices that convert linguistic input into well-formed (or not so well-formed) outputs. They need to be understood as people, which in turn means we need to appreciate their human agency' (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Furthermore, Taylor concludes that human agency is about more than performance, or doing, but is intimately linked to meaning and interpretation (Taylor, 1985). As agents, learners actively work on building their own learning situation. Learners in the study who experienced a silent period, worked on constructing the terms and conditions of their learning and gained access to opportunities for participation in the TL and consequently successfully entered the virtuous circle. Human agents are 'capable (given the right circumstances) of critically analysing the discourses which frame their lives, and of claiming or resisting them according to the effects they wish to bring about' (Burr, 1995). Seen in this light, the silent period in L2 acquisition may be interpreted as one stage in the trajectory of learners exercising agency toward more complete participation, rather than as simply a stage of incomprehension and rejection of learning.

3. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to reconceptualise, from a situated learning perspective, the issue of a silent period which had previously been understood as a cognitive phenomenon in relation to learners' input and output. In my study, more than half of the students interviewed perceived that they had experienced a silent period at the initial stage of studying abroad even though they were not novice learners. Of course, having just transferred from a formal learning environment to a naturalistic environment may have brought about different types of input and have caused some kind of problems of comprehension leading to silence. However, it was revealed that silence also results from students not being satisfied with their limited self-expression as it fails to represent their real social identity in the TL. Thus, the silent period is not just a period of rejection or abandonment of learning but a site of struggle and a pathway to finding new ways for self-expression and participation in the new language.

The various strategies that these learners employed to break out of their silent periods and find ways to participate in the TL would provide useful examples for those who intend to learn the TL by studying abroad. Considering that some conversational partners are perceived to have lower tolerance or understanding of learners' insufficiently expressed selves, avoiding such partners and finding more tolerant partners to start with would be one strategy to employ. Native speakers who have little prior experience in conversations with non-native speakers of the TL and compatriots with higher linguistic abilities are two such partners named by our participants. Conversely, other non-native international students are found to be easier since they are perceived to share similar problems. It is recommended that learners start conversing with those perceived to be easy conversational partners at the initial stage. Also, in order to expand the sites for participation outside the school and the residence, a further recommendation would be to join social clubs and engage in voluntary work and/or part-time jobs. As Baldauf and Luke (1990) suggest, it is important to become a member of the club first in order to get the qualifications needed. Once you become a member (or obtain a chance to participate), you can gradually acquire the shared repertoires and expand your participation through speaking.

Despite the small scale of this study, our participants enable us to assume that a considerable proportion of Japanese students who study abroad during university perceive they experience a silent period in some form or other, suggesting that it is an issue that ought not to be dismissed. Since this study only investigated cases of Japanese students, in the future we need to investigate learners of various backgrounds in order to see whether the silent period is a more universally experienced phenomenon and whether learners of other backgrounds follow similar routes from restricted participation to more complete participation.

Furthermore, the study only focused on learners who experienced a silent period and did not investigate those who did not. We still do not know what brings about the differences between the two groups. Six of our students had started learning the TL after entering university and had no

experience of living abroad prior to studying abroad. The two students (Yoko and Akira) who experienced a partial silent period had a longer history of learning the TL and had a higher proficiency in the TL. On the other hand, the learners who did not experience a silent period belonged to either of the following: those with a longer history of learning the TL (9-10 years) and had an experience of learning the TL in a natural language acquisition environment prior to study abroad, or conversely those with a shorter learning history and set lower goals for study abroad. We can assume that there is some kind of relationship between the TL level and the silent period. More research is needed with learners at different TL levels to come to a better understanding of the conditions in which learners fall silent.

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