



The Impact of "Imagination of Students" in the Development of the Professional Identity of Four Japanese Teachers of English in Japanese Higher Education

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Bio Data:

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Abstract

This study investigates how relatively new Japanese teachers¹ of English in higher education in Japan develop their professional identity. Teachers' professional identity has come to be seen as one of the most critical components in shaping classroom practices (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005). Language teachers, who were previously viewed as technicians who applied appropriate pedagogical methodologies, are now recognized as individual agents who hold individual beliefs, knowledge and attitudes toward teaching, learning, and their students, all of which affect every aspect of classroom teaching (e.g. Woods, 1996; Golembek, 1998; Gatbonton, 1999; Borg, 2003; Tsui, 2007).

Key words: Japanese teachers, professional identity, beliefs, attitudes

Introduction

In the Japanese context, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on the teaching practices, beliefs, and identity of secondary school English teachers (e.g. Browne and Wada, 1998; Sato and Kleinsasser, 2004; Gorsuch; 1999, 2000, 2001; Sato, 2002, Sakui, 2004), but relatively few focusing on tertiary teachers (e.g. Matsuura, Chiba and Hilderbrant, 2001, Sakui and Gaies, 2003, Simon-Maeda, 2004a; and Stewart, 2005, 2006). The paucity of such studies is unfortunate because

Japanese university English teachers have a strong influence over English language education in Japan. They teach English language to enormous numbers of tertiary students, they conduct teacher-training courses, and they are responsible for creating the English component of university entrance exams, which is said to shape secondary school teachers' practices (Brown and Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2001).

This study, therefore, aims to contribute to a greater understanding of English language education in Japan by looking at the professional identity of four relatively new teachers, who are embarking upon their careers at a time when tertiary education in Japan is undergoing a great deal of reform. University reforms, which began in 2004, include privatization of national universities, establishment of a rigorous assessment system for receiving public funding, and emphasis on transparency and accountability in higher education institutions. These reforms have shaken the Japanese academy by questioning the traditional role of professors, who had been well known for their apathy toward teaching and preference for conducting research (Amano and Poole, 2005).

A further difference that exists between older and younger teachers concerns academic backgrounds. Prior to the 1990s, few Japanese university teachers had completed their doctorate degrees, (Nagasawa, 2004), but universities now prefer to hire new recruits who already have PhDs, often obtained from abroad (Hada, 2005). Those entering the profession today may thus have a completely different outlook toward English language teaching, which is bound to shape the future of English education in Japan. The research question that guided this study is the following:

- How do Japanese teachers of English in higher education construct their professional identity as they become members of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998) of English teachers?

METHODOLOGY

The Participants

The four teachers in this study, introduced in Table 1, were selected from a wider

pool of participants in my research on the professional identity of Japanese teachers of English in higher education, on the basis of their status as relative newcomers in their universities where they teach full-time and/or have tenure.

Table 1 Participants' Biographical Data

Name ⁱⁱ	Gender	Age	Position	Type of University	# of yrs. at university	Area	PhD
Taka	M	33	Assistant Professor	Non-academic Private	1	Urban ⁱⁱⁱ	Not yet
Kumiko	F	43	Assistant Professor	Mid-level Academic Private	3	Urban	Not yet
Kana	F	35	Assistant Professor	Prefectural	1	Regional ^{iv}	Yes
Miwa	F	33	Contract	National	1	Urban	Yes

Data Collection

Interviews, loosely following Seidman's (2006) model for in-depth interviews, were held between December 2007 and December 2008 at times and places convenient for the participants throughout Japan. Seidman argues that three ninety-minute interviews over a period of several weeks are optimal for obtaining meaningful data to study teachers' lives. The first interview aims to understand the interviewee's experiences through their life histories, the second to understand the context of the workplace, and the third aims to create an overall picture of the interviewee's lived experience through reflection over past experiences and how these experiences connect to their present and future lives. Due to the participants' busy schedules and their physical locations throughout Japan, only Taka and Miwa were interviewed three times, Kumiko twice, and Kana once. Nevertheless, all of the interviews followed Seidman's suggested interview protocol.

Process of Analysis

To “make sense of the data” (Silverman, 1993), the interviews were uploaded into a qualitative software analysis program called NVivo, and were analyzed by coding them into two categories that NVivo calls “free nodes” and “tree nodes” that can be conceptually linked to other nodes and other data stored in NVivo (See Bazeley, 2007 for a comprehensive explanation of NVivo software). Because the aim of the study was to investigate the principle activities relatively new teachers engage in and how they construct their professional identity as university English teachers, the second phase of the analysis followed a concept-driven approach using Wenger’s (1998) framework of social identity to establish thematic categories. First, I examined the interviews to establish categories of engagement that emerged from the participants’ day-to-day work-related practices. The three main categories that were found are:

- Engagement in teaching
- Engagement in the context of the university
- Engagement in the wider community

After these categories were established, I looked for instances where ‘imagination’ and ‘alignment’ seemed to influence the participants’ perceptions of themselves and of others around them. Various themes emerged during this process, but due to space limitations, however, this paper will focus only on three areas where identity as a teacher was formed in part through imagination of students under the category of engagement in teaching:

Discussion

Imagination of students in relationship to themselves as students

The first theme concerned these teachers’ perceptions of their students in relation to how they remember themselves as students. These powerful memories are shaped by their wide array of experiences, as well as their educational, socio-cultural, and gendered backgrounds, and they not only influence their perceptions of their current

students, but also their alignment of their teaching practices and their satisfaction in teaching.

Miwa and Kana, for example, perceive a wide gap between themselves and their students, which results in tension in teaching. As students, both women struggled due to their low socioeconomic backgrounds. As the first in their families to go to university, they studied hard, making the most of their education, justifying to themselves and to their parents that the expense of higher education was worthwhile. They felt disadvantaged as students in comparison to their more affluent classmates, and worked hard to raise their communicative and academic skills, enjoying classes taught by their Japanese professors who focused on detailed lexical and grammatical explanations of literary works.

Miwa thus wants her students to develop an understanding of English from a similar perspective, saying that if they do not, their language study is only superficial and they will merely become “secretaries or office workers.” She feels her students are unwilling to make the same effort for self-study that she did, and as a result, she is dissatisfied having to spend class time reviewing what students should have studied alone. Miwa’s comment below, where she compares herself to her students, shows how differently she perceives her students’ attitudes toward study compared to her own attitudes:

I didn’t have problems in finding motivation to read [...] I remember I was reading *Newsweek* and *Time* when I was in the freshman year. Of course I had to look up the dictionary very often, but I could still read it and understand it...by myself. I didn’t need anybody explaining what the expression means or anything back then. But most of the students I teach, they need guidance in that area, too.

Taka and Kumiko also believe their students lack interest and motivation, but they seem to have a greater degree of empathy for their students because they perceive that they have much in common with them. Kumiko and Taka had a much easier time during their college days than Miwa and Kana did. They came from financially secure, middle class backgrounds, and thus, for them, university life was a time for

self-fulfillment and self-exploration.

When asked about study, Taka laughed and said, “Study? No! No! No! Play? Yes! Yes! Yes!” His history as a happy-go-lucky student enables him to empathize with his students, whom he describes as unmotivated and with inferiority complexes due to their previous lack of academic success, which resulted in them only being able to attend an academically low-level university. Compared to Miwa, who feels frustrated at having to teach what the students should have studied at home, Taka does not mind doing this. He knows his students will not self-study, so he willingly devotes class time in teaching the basics. His experiences of learning to communicate in English by memorizing useful expressions in a travel phrase book influenced his attitudes toward language learning. Unlike Kana and Miwa, he didn’t learn English through hard study but from having to survive during his travels throughout Asia. Therefore, he teaches his students “tricks” in order to “get by” in English. Because Taka understands that his students are unmotivated, he attempts to teach them in ways that may be more appealing to them than by, for example, studying a reading text in depth.

Imagination of what the participants believe their students think of them

The second theme that emerged from the data analysis concerning the participants’ relationships with their students centered on what they believe their students think of them. All of the teachers want to be liked by their students, and Kumiko, Kana and Taka, try to cultivate personal relationships with them. They like it when students drop by their offices friendly chat. This popularity does, however, come with some drawbacks, and these teachers are learning how to create a balance between being a “friendly teacher” and the students’ “friend.” Kumiko, for example, had to learn to turn students away from her office when she is busy with paperwork, and Kana had to learn to discipline some students who took advantage of their friendly relationship when they skipped class and failed to submit assignments.

What the students think of the teachers is also found in the form of explicit feedback on teacher evaluation forms. Kumiko, for example, reports receiving positive feedback on these forms and she is proud that her classes are among the most

popular in the university. Negative feedback from students, on the other hand, is generally implicit, and is reflected in students' behavior: they do poorly on quizzes and exams, they are passive or sleep during class, or they skip class altogether. Interestingly, the teachers note that they can receive positive and negative feedback from the same students at different times. Students may seek out teachers during office hours to chat but still do poorly on a test.

The teachers' interviews seem to suggest that if identification as a teacher is strongly connected to the transmission of knowledge, as in the case of Miwa, negative feedback in the form of poor test scores may undermine confidence as a teacher. On the other hand, if identification as a teacher is strongly connected to building personal relationships with students, poor test scores may not have the same negative impact.

Imagination of what the participants believe their students can and should learn

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis concerns the teachers' imagination in relation to their students' learning, and in particular, what they imagine their students *can* and *should* learn in their classes.

None of the teachers are particularly optimistic that their students will achieve English proficiency as a result of their teaching. They feel that students fail to make sufficient effort and they lack purpose for studying English, which contributes to passive classroom behavior. Kana is irritated by this passivity, and wants to tell students, "Come on come on, you are young and energetic, and you are wasting your energy." Miwa says it seems that students "almost took a vow of silence" in their determination to "just sit there." For her, the "toughest part is to make them work, make them at least be there. Not just physically, but mentally."

Although pessimistic about the outcome of their students' English language learning, the teachers have attached importance to other pedagogical goals, which include helping students to develop critical and independent thinking skills, to gain a broader perspective of the world, to develop more self confidence, and to improve communication skills (in Japanese).

Kumiko, who dislikes classes that focus solely on language teaching, prefers classes

where students are encouraged to develop their opinions, believing that it is the *content* of the class that the students will remember rather than the language learning. Her lessons center around controversial topics, especially those related to gender. She feels that such knowledge will help prepare her female students in particular for the sexual discrimination she is sure they will face in the real world.

Miwa teaches her students about the impact of gender on society as well. For her, choosing such topics for reading and discussion enables her to connect her personal and academic interests to teaching English language, as the following comment illustrates:

I notice I think one of the things I have to tell you about being a teacher is that mostly probably I told you that I'm not really happy about being a teacher. I feel like I have to do, a kind of mission. I have to. I'm a feminist and my specialty is gender studies and women's literature. I have to teach young girls how to respect themselves, and how to insist what they truly are, you know, in relation to men and in society.

Kana echoes this idea, and wants her students to learn how to apply what is learned in one context to another. Without such skills, she is afraid they might be "easily taken to a cult." Critical thinking skills will help them become less passive, which she perceives to be a cultural trait that is especially predominant among her female students.

Taka also feels that his students are unable to articulate their ideas because they are accustomed to being passive followers of teachers, and because they lack confidence due to their previous lack of academic success. Therefore, he places priority on helping students learn independent thinking by exposing them to a wider perspective of the world.

Surprisingly, all four teachers place priority on improving students' communication skills *in Japanese*, as well as in English. Kana believes that although her students may not learn much English, English study can empower them because it introduces an alternative communication style and will help them overcome some of the limitations of Japanese, which she says encourages humility, passiveness, and

silence.

Conclusion

This study has discussed ways that four teachers draw upon their imagination of their students in order to construct their identities as beginning teachers. The narratives are congruent with Tsui's (2007) findings that identity is "relational as well as experiential" (p. 678). Professional identity for these relatively new teachers develops through their real and imagined relationships with their students and through their lived day-to-day experiences.

The most striking finding was the overall pessimism the teachers had concerning the outcomes of their English language teaching, resulting in the teachers' priority placed on non-linguistic pedagogical goals. One reason for the pedagogical shift away from language teaching may be each teacher's weaker identification as an English *language teacher* and a stronger identification as a university teacher with an English-related specialty. Their identities are strongly bound by their academic specialties, and English language teaching is something that they *do* but this does not determine who they *are*. More studies are needed to determine if such beliefs are prevalent among other Japanese teachers of English in higher education. Investigations of these teachers may provide much insight into the state of English language education in Japan.

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ⁱ In this study, I use the term “teacher” to refer to all those teaching in higher education, regardless of the academic position they may hold.

ⁱⁱ All names are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱⁱ Urban areas in this study refer to those that are within the greater Tokyo area.

^{iv} Regional areas in this study refer to all other places outside of urban areas.