Imagining a Career as a Language Teacher in Japan

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Reference Data:
Clements, P. (2024). Imagining a career as a language teacher in Japan. In B. Lacy, P. Lege, & P. Ferguson (Eds.), *Growth Mindset in Language Education*. JALT.

Researchers now recognize the importance of supporting the development of language teacher identity (LTI) among teachers-in-training, one way of doing which is to have teachers systematically reflect on their own stories. This study presents an analysis of narratives and subsequent reflections written by Japanese preservice teachers (PSTs) aiming to acquire an English teacher's license. The data consist of written texts from 14 PSTs and follow-up interviews with six of them. Using imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) as a theoretical framework, the analysis highlights the ways in which participants envisioned future teaching careers, including the kinds of teachers they wanted to become, the working conditions they expected to face, and the impact of educational culture on day-to-day practice. The study demonstrates the potential utility of having PSTs engage in systematic reflection on their own narratives as a means of encouraging LTI development and points to several avenues of further research.

先行研究では、教育実習生の言語教師アイデンティティ（LTI）の発達を支援することが重要という認識があり、そのための一つの方法として、教師たちに自分自身の物語を分析的に振り返ってもらうことが挙げられる。本研究は、英語教員免許の取得を目指す日本の教育実習生（PSTs）が書いたナラティブおよび振り返りを分析したものである。データは、14名の教育実習生（PSTs）の文章と、そのうちの6名への追跡インタビューから成る。理論的枠組みとして「想像の共同体」(imagined communities)（Anderson, 1991）という概念を用いることで、参加者が理想とする教師像や、直面することが予測される労働条件、教育文化が日々の実践に与える影響など、将来の教師としてのキャリアをどのように思い描いているのかを調査した。結果は、言語教師アイデンティティ（LTI）の発達を促す手段として、教育実習生（PSTs）に自らのナラティブについて系統的に内省を行わせることが有効である可能性を示すとともに、今後の研究についていくつかの課題を示した。

https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2023-30

This article was originally published in the Selected Papers section of the 2023 Postconference Publication (PCP), *Growth Mindset in Language Education*. The PCP publishes papers based on presentations given at the JALT International Conference, and the Selected Papers section highlights a small number of papers of exceptional quality that have been first suggested by the editorial staff and then vetted by the JALTPublications Board through a blind review process. We feel that papers like this one represent some of the best work that the JALT Conference and the PCP have to offer, and encourage interested readers to check out other selected papers at https://jalt-publications.org/proceedings.

The last several decades have seen a growing interest in language teacher identity (LTI) as an analytical lens for understanding language teachers' professional development (Barkhuizen, 2017b; Clarke, 2008; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Varghese et al., 2005). This interest derives on the one hand from a recognition of the importance of identity in language learning (Norton, 2013) and on the other hand from an established body of work in teacher education (Beijaard et al., 2004; Izadinia, 2013; Sfard & Prusack, 2005). In the introduction to a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on LTI, Varghese et al. (2016) observed that LTI is both a research frame and a pedagogical tool, allowing researchers to construct powerful and situated analyses of teacher development and providing teacher educators with productive ways of making that development concrete and accessible to teachers-in-training. Examples of work that combines these two aims include Barkhuizen (2016a), Clarke (2008), Kanno and Stuart (2011), and Tsui (2007).

This study is similarly informed by empirical and pedagogical goals. Specifically, I analyze narratives written by preservice teachers (PSTs) for an ELT methods course in which they reflected on the prospect of a teaching career in Japan. In a separate paper (Clements, 2024) I have explored the ways in which these PSTs described their decision to pursue a teaching career. In this paper I examine the narratives for what they suggest about how participants envisioned their future careers as language teachers. This analysis not only yields insight into what university students think and know about the profession they are preparing to enter but also has implications for how teacher training can better prepare them for that profession.

Context

The course described in this study is the last in a series of ELT methods courses for students in the education faculty of a mid-sized national university in central Japan. Students in the education faculty's English education program typically make up around half of the enrollment in the course, with the other half consisting of students from other departments within the faculty. Students are usually in their 3rd or 4th year of university and have completed two or three teaching practicums by the time they enroll. Entrance surveys indicate that they take the course for various purposes, including fulfilling graduation requirements, acquiring English teaching qualifications, and preparing for careers as English teachers.

One of the goals of the course, whether students plan to become language teachers or not, is to encourage them to think critically about the prospect of a language teaching career, primarily through a series of three reflective writing assignments inspired by Barkhuizen (2008). Students first write two narratives: one about a significant language learning experience and the other about a significant teaching experience. These narratives

impose few specific requirements other than that they be in English and be as vivid and detailed as possible. For the third assignment, students analyze one or both of their narratives based on three scales of context—or levels—labeled *story*, *Story*, and *STORY*. The first level (*story*) is the immediate here and now of the narrative: the people who appear; their thoughts, feelings, and relationships; and the settings and times in which the story takes place. The next level (*Story*) focuses on the communities and institutions implicated in the story as well as longer time scales extending before and after the narrative proper. The third level (*STORY*) zooms out to the sociopolitical context, including government policy and national culture as well as time scales extending to life histories and career trajectories. Students are familiarized with the levels and how to apply them through feedback and in-class discussions following the completion of the first two assignments (see Clements, 2021, for details).

In order to investigate the results of these activities more systematically, I obtained university approval to collect data prior to a recent implementation of the course. After the course ended and grades had been submitted (in February 2022), I sent an announcement detailing the aims of the study and asking students to participate by giving permission for their writing to be analyzed and sitting for interviews. Of the 43 students enrolled in the course, 14 (10 female, four male) consented to their writing being used, and six of those (three male, three female) agreed to an interview. Interviews followed a semi-structured format and were conducted individually in English or Japanese, depending on participant preference. One participant preferred to be interviewed online in early March; the remaining interviews were conducted in person on campus the following April and May. Interviews lasted from 23 to 34 minutes. The participant information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Year	Major
Kotaro	Male	3	Educational psychology
Hisashi	Male	3	English education
Nica	Female	3	English education
Akiko	Female	3	English education
Chiharu	Female	3	English education
Sammy	Male	3	English education
P1	Female	3	Early education
P2	Female	3	Educational practice
P3	Female	3	English education
P4	Female	2	Humanities
P5	Male	3	English education
P6	Female	4	Educational psychology
P7	Female	3	English education
P8	Female	3	English education

Note. Those who were interviewed are designated by pseudonyms, which were chosen by the participants themselves and do not necessarily reflect ethnicity.

Theoretical Framework

The 42 written assignments and six interview transcripts collected for the study were initially coded based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative space: the people and their relative roles in the story, the settings and shifts from place to place, and the time(s) of the action as it unfolds in the past, present, or future. Coding was iterative and first conducted "horizontally" (i.e., all of the first reflective assignments were coded, then all of the second, and so on), then "vertically" (i.e., all documents related to one participant were

coded, then all for the next participant, and so on). This process produced a range of themes, including PSTs' reasons for choosing a teaching career (Clements, 2024), their perspectives on the value of the teacher training program that they were enrolled in, and the future working conditions that they anticipated. This last theme is the focus of this study.

The specific analysis presented here draws on the concept of *imagined communities*, a term coined by Anderson (1991) to explain how citizens of a nation can see themselves as a cohesive group even though they will only ever know a small number of their compatriots. Imagined communities, and imagination more broadly, were later used by Wenger (1998) as part of the theory of communities of practice, which views learning as "not just a cognitive process of acquiring a set of skills and knowledge, but is part of changing participation patterns in various communities with shared practices" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 242). An important aspect of this process concerns the ways in which learners imagine themselves acting within communities whose members are removed in space and time, which in turn affect their participation in current training, leading in some cases to active engagement and in other cases to withdrawal and nonparticipation. Imagined communities have been fruitfully applied in studies of language learners (e.g., Norton, 2001; Yim, 2016) and language teachers-in-training (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016a; Pavlenko, 2003). Writing about the latter, Barkhuizen (2016b) aptly summarizes:

> Teachers in training imagine themselves as members of future imagined communities of teachers working in classrooms and schools; they construct imagined identities in those communities, a process which has implications for how they go about doing their teacher education work and constructing their identities in the present. (p. 31)

Within this theoretical framework, the following section presents selected extracts that were analyzed in accordance with Barkhuizen's (2016a, 2016b, 2017a) short story approach, which involves closely reading qualitative data for their narrative content (people, places, times) and the three levels of context described earlier (*story*, *Story*, *STORY*). This selection and analysis was guided by the following question:

How did PSTs imagine themselves as language teachers?

Findings

Narrative coding of the data yielded three overlapping themes related to PSTs' imagining of a language teaching career: (a) the kinds of teachers they wanted to become, (b) working conditions and support networks in and around school communities, and (c) aspects of Japanese educational culture that they wanted to change or resist. The extracts presented below have been edited for spelling errors only; interviewees are referred to with pseudonyms (which were selected by participants themselves and do not necessarily reflect ethnicity), whereas other participants are referred to with labels such as *P2*. Extracts from reflective writing assignments are cited using *R1*, *R2*, or *R3*; the first two of these were learning and teaching narratives, respectively, and the last was an analysis using the *story/Story/STORY* framework.

Becoming a Teacher

The primary way in which PSTs imagined a language teaching career was by describing the kinds of teachers they wanted to become. These descriptions typically focused on student-teacher relationships and how they interacted with the learning environment. For example, P1 wrote about working in a cram school—a common part-time job among university students in Japan—and learning to sense when students had personal problems that impacted their engagement: "When I feel [students] do not have much motivation and different from usual, I do not scold them and [instead] talk with them" (R2). She later reflected on this statement as a change she had made to her practice that contradicted what she saw as the expected role of the cram school teacher:

> I thought teaching knowledge to students is the main job of cram schools' teacher and that is a common view of teachers in society … When they did not have much motivation of studying, I taught them the same as usual and I made them study. However … I changed my mind and the way of teaching depending on their personalities and feelings. As a result, their motivation became higher and they came to open their heart. (P1, R3)

At the basic level (*story*) these reflections describe the cram school tutor developing relationships with individual students through sensitivity to their personal backgrounds and daily lives. However, the reflections also refer to *Story* and *STORY* by implying that cram schools are assumed by society to be places for "study," defined here as absorbing knowledge, whereas students' interpersonal concerns are more appropriately addressed elsewhere.

Eight of the participants wrote about the importance of teachers' ability to understand students,

particularly learning to closely observe and "read" students, a process that became more challenging in public school settings with large classes. One participant, Kotaro, wrote about a comment from his university supervisor on the daily notes that he kept during his teaching practicum. During my interview with him, Kotaro clarified that he had written in his notes about the class that he was teaching, specifically that "everyone" had seemed "in good spirits (*genki*)" that day, to which his supervisor had responded, "Who is *everyone* (minna *tte dare*)?" Kotaro reflected on this in his narrative as follows:

> After my teacher told me that comment. I began to see children as individuals. It affected me in many ways. For example, when I make my teaching plan, I easily predict children's reactions. And when I see children, I become see children in many points of view. I see posture, the way they talk, and who they talk to. I knew observation was important. But I found true meaning through going to school as teacher. (R2)

Kotaro thus translated his specific experience (*story*) into general observations about professionalism in teaching (*STORY*). That is, teachers-in-training may know and agree that observation is important, but only through experience do they find the "true meaning" of observation as a complex process of assessing and responding to students' day-to-day needs.

Working Conditions and Support Networks

Participants took up a number of issues related to working conditions and their potential impact on teachers' ability to maintain the professionalism described above. These issues related mainly to teachers' workload, particularly as determined by class size and duties other than subject-matter instruction. Here as well, teaching at a cram school, an experience that many participants shared, became a point of contrast. P2 wrote about tutoring a cram school student who was having difficulty with English grammar, which she was able to address by linking it with pronunciation:

> For him, learning pronunciation seems to be fun, so I decided to teach him grammar and pronunciation at the same time. As he learned how to pronounce, he became able to read sentences. If he can read a sentence, he can learn grammar by using it in the sentence. (P2, R2)

She later reflected on the limitations and difficulties of applying this experience to large public school classes. About teaching the cram school student, she wrote, "I had a lot of opportunities to talk to him and understand his preferences, and it wasn't that hard to understand his ... personality, and the way he studies English at home" (P2, R3). In other words, the one-on-one format of the cram school (*Story*) facilitated what she saw as the most effective teaching approach, which was to find ways of connecting areas of difficulty with students' interests and strengths. However, this approach became a daunting challenge when imagined in a public school environment:

> There are as many teaching methods as there are students, considering their likes/dislikes and strengths ... It is also necessary to consider the characteristics of each class. In other words, it is necessary to find not only a suitable teaching method for each student, but also a suitable teaching method for each class. (P2, R3)

While acknowledging that large classes provided advantages that teachers could capitalize on, she argued that many students found them demotivating. Thus, she took the *story* elements of her cram school experience, applied them to another institutional setting (*Story*), and used that application to make observations about a systemic issue faced by language teachers in general (*STORY*): balancing individual needs with class needs.

Related to working conditions was the issue of the different kinds of support teachers might have access to. This issue is exemplified by P3, who wrote about her practicum experience at a junior high school whose teachers had developed an explicit focus on learner autonomy. In her teaching narrative she described how she was able to overcome her own lack of expertise through students' positive responses to her lesson plans: "Through the teaching practice, I felt my inexpertness as a teacher, but thanks to students, I could finish the teaching practice" (P3, R2). She later analyzed this story by exploring how the teachers at the school were able to support students' autonomy "behind their back[s]":

> I think the one of the reasons [that teachers can develop students' autonomy] is that teachers cooperate with each other. They build a good relationship with each other. For example, two English teachers often discuss their English class. They respect each other and they have a common idea of how they want their students to grow English skill. (P3, R3)

This extract focuses on teacher cooperation that students themselves might not be directly aware of as an important characteristic of a particular school community (*Story*). However, the analysis concludes

by suggesting that cooperation among teachers is something that schools need to support in general:

> Teacher have a lot of work. For example, class management, school life instruction, school management, club activity and making lesson … I think cooperation with other organization and professions is so important. School should set up a system for the cooperation. I want to think about how to cooperate with other people for students' school life. (P3, R3)

This extract refers to a well-known issue (Kuwabara & Ujioka, 2022) in Japanese public school education (*STORY*): teacher workloads and how other duties detract from instruction. (Note that in the extract above, "making lesson" comes at the end of the list!) Although other participants also referred to this issue, this participant proposed a specific solution based on her own experiences (*story*) of seeing teachers consult productively with each other.

Japanese Educational Culture

The final theme concerns Japanese educational culture and how it might aid or hamper teachers trying to teach in the ways that they consider most effective. Participants wrote about various *STORY*-level issues and how they might impact learning conditions, particularly student motivation and engagement. These discussions tended to stem from participants' analyses of their language-learning experiences (in R1 narratives) rather than from teaching experiences. For example, in his analysis, Hisashi observed that his primary motivation to learn English as a child had come not from what happened in English class, which he found demotivating, but from experiences at home: "My motivation to study English came to be raised when I felt that 'I want to talk directly with my [English-speaking] uncle.'" (R3). Hisashi extended this (*story*) experience to the fact that English is a compulsory subject for most students (*STORY*), arguing against what he saw as the common opinion that it was often a demotivating factor and suggesting that compulsory subjects were important because they increased "children's options for the future." He concluded, "It is important to love the subject in order to gain expertise and deepen your learning. However, it is important to have a wide range and study to find that area of your interest" (R3). In my interview with him, he clarified the English teacher's role as one of making the language interesting and accessible to as many students as possible, regardless of their individual attitudes toward English. This goal, he suggested, was particularly challenging because he considered English a "desk" subject, in contrast to other subjects that involved practical and physical activity (such as PE).

Participants also singled out aspects of educational culture that they wanted to change or resist. For example, one participant noted that English teaching in Japan tends "to make students worried about their mistakes … I want to change the environment … A teacher has to be easy to talk to because children can ask a teacher what they don't understand" (P4, R3). Although similar concerns were taken up by 10 participants, a smaller number (four) suggested that teachers also need to challenge students. The following extract is from a participant's analysis of his language-learning narrative, in which he had described his difficulty communicating in English while studying abroad and how that experience had motivated him to study harder:

> Some teachers believe that giving positive experience and praise them is the best way to teach. However, I feel it is important for teachers to give negative experience to students to motivate them to learn English. In fact, students would feel bitter if they were not able to communicate with someone in English. I think the feeling will lead to motivate them to learn English. (P5, R3)

The analysis continues by suggesting that these negative experiences should be carefully managed to lead to positive outcomes: "It is difficult for teachers to use negative experience to teach English because they have to pay attention to student's feeling, but negative experience is also one of good experience for students to learn English" (P5, R3). Thus, this participant used his own experience (*story*) to imagine the kind of teacher he wanted to become against a general tendency of teachers to, in his view, overemphasize positive experiences (*STORY*).

The importance of challenging students was also taken up by Nica, who wrote in her R1 about an English teacher she had had in junior high school who "often said the word which makes students feel frustrated, angry, or sad." Although most of her classmates disliked this teacher, she herself found his "aggressive" language motivating because it made her want to work harder as a way of demonstrating her capabilities to him. In both R1 and later in R3, she reflected that her language-learning identity was "affected by some conflicts. All of the conflict made me grow a lot and I enjoyed it. I fought both the English teacher and me. It must be an essential spur to my educational growth" (R3). She concluded that conflict would be an important element of her approach as an English teacher

because it made students "stronger" both in their English abilities and as people.

In my interview with Nica, we talked about her initial narrative (R1) and about conflict in teaching more generally. She suggested that her junior high school teacher's way of creating conflict had been useful to her but was probably not productive for other students; indeed, she had written that the teacher's behavior seemed to stem from his lack of experience. At the same time, she contrasted his approach with that of other teachers, who tended to treat everyone equally, which she described as boring, and which related to a more general cultural attitude (*STORY*). When asked whether conflict in education was typically seen as negative or positive, she chose the former, suggesting that Japanese people prefer to try to be as cooperative as possible, and that this tendency often resulted in students' not being challenged to fully utilize their abilities. The solution was for teachers to be sensitive to different students' needs and provide "child-appropriate learning (*ko ni oujita manabi*)." Teachers who were unable to tailor their instruction in this way, she suggested, tended to fall back on treating everyone in the same way, resulting in a kind of lowest-common-denominator approach.

Implications and Conclusion

A limitation of this study is that it necessarily involved self-selected participants, who were already likely to be positively invested in teacher training and teaching careers. Although several of the participants had actually decided not to become teachers by the time they were interviewed, this decision did not seem to greatly affect their outlook on teaching as a career. However, it was unfortunately not possible to contrast these accounts with those of less engaged PSTs. More importantly, it must be borne in mind that the short story analysis used here is an example of what Barkhuizen (2011) calls "narrative knowledging," an open-ended interpretive process in which narratives are (co) constructed, analyzed, reported on, read about, and so on. The analysis presented above is not intended as definitive; rather, it adds layers of meaning to the participants' own analyses, to which readers of this report can then add their own understandings, thus continuing the process.

Nevertheless, this analysis highlights the usefulness of asking PSTs to produce stories and then systematically reflect on them as a means of stimulating the "identity work" (Clarke, 2008; Varghese et al., 2016) that has come to be seen as crucial to teacher development. It suggests that these participants were able to critically reflect on (a) their learning and teaching experiences and how those experiences might translate into effective teaching in the future; (b) the working conditions that they might face, including relationships with other teachers, and how those conditions might impact their ability to teach in ways that they considered effective; and (c) broader issues of educational culture and how they might affect day-to-day practice. Moreover, insights like these can be used by the teacher trainer to guide further activity and discussion focusing on specific issues in the language-teaching profession.

I conclude by considering potential avenues for further research in this area. First, this study focused on the stories and reflections of the participants themselves, which could be usefully compared with other data such as classroom observations, teaching artifacts, and interviews with mentoring teachers. Another possible source of additional insight would be the collection of longitudinal data on the same participants before and after they embark on teaching careers. Finally, this study touched on a specific issue that deserves more detailed investigation. As noted above, most of the participants had experience working in cram schools, which they often pointed to as influential in their developing conceptions of themselves as teachers. Since cram school work seems to be fairly common, at least among these students, future research could focus directly on that setting and how it interacts with teacher training. Work in these areas would further add to a growing understanding of the importance of identity development for preservice teachers.

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