Reflecting on Teacher Roles Using Visual Methods

Hiroshi Moritani
Hiroshima University of Economics

Reference Data:

Moritani, H. (2018). Reflecting on teacher roles using visual methods. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & P. Bennett (Eds.), *Language teaching in a global age: Shaping the classroom, shaping the world*. Tokyo: JALT.

In this paper, I discuss the use of visual methods as a tool for reflection with research participants in a qualitative study. Investigating a very personal topic, such as teachers' perceptions of their roles, can be difficult if the participants have never consciously thought about the topic. In such cases, research methods that can not only elicit information but also prompt reflection are necessary. I did this by using two kinds of visual prompt—mind maps and time-series sheets—in an ongoing study on teacher-role identities, seen as their conceptual sense of who they are as teachers and what they do in the classroom (Farrell, 2011). The participants were asked to draw maps based on their subjective perceptions of their roles, and I elicited verbal data from them using these prompts. The benefits of this technique, which can prompt reflection, and the drawbacks of visual methods are discussed.

本稿は、質的研究において研究参加者の内省を促す手段としての視覚方法の使用について論じる。個人的な話題について調査する際、研究参加者がその話題について意識的でない場合、その調査は困難なものとなりえる。そのような場合は、単に情報を得るだけでなく、内省を促すような研究手法が必要である。本稿では、筆者が現在行っている教師役割アイデンティティの研究において、どのようにしてマインドマップや時系列表といった視覚刺激を利用して参加者の内省を促したかについて報告する。役割アイデンティティとは、教師としての自己ならびに教室での行動を概念レベルで捉えたもので（Farrell, 2011）、研究参加者は主観的に認識している自身の役割について図示するように指示された。筆者はこれらの図表を用いて参加者から口頭データを収集した。本稿ではこの手法の内省を促すことができるという利点と視覚方式が抱える問題について述べる。

As Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) pointed out, it is necessary to understand teachers and their identity in order to understand language teaching and learning. In recent years, a growing number of studies have been conducted on the identities of both preservice teachers (e.g., Clarke, 2008) and in-service teachers (e.g., Canh, 2013; Farrell, 2011; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Nagatomo, 2012; Tsui, 2007). These studies have illuminated the complex, multifaceted, and evolving nature of language teacher identities, which results from teaching being a social activity that is under the influence of various factors, such as the teaching methods employed, institutional policy changes, and teaching contexts (Pennington, 2014). Because identity emerges in and through narratives that teachers provide about themselves (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), self-reflection is crucial (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). As such, when investigating teacher identities, a researcher needs methods that not only facilitate eliciting information but also prompt reflection. In this paper I describe how I prompted reflection using visual methods in an ongoing study on the identities of in-service English teachers at Japanese universities and discuss the benefits of using such methods.

In the field of language teacher identity studies, narrative inquiry is an established methodological approach (Cheung, Said, & Park, 2015). Researchers analyze teachers' practices, beliefs, knowledge, and identity in the narratives that teachers tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and the data are typically generated from oral interviews, written diaries, and online blogs (Barkhuizen, 2015). For example, Canh (2013) employed semistructured interviews with six native English-speaking teachers all teaching at a university in Vietnam to investigate the construction of their professional identities. Kanno and Stuart (2011) followed two novice teachers' identity development for 1 academic year with three interviews, accompanied by class observations and analysis of documents such as course syllabi and journals. Tsui (2007) described the identity negotiation of one Chinese EFL teacher from whom she elicited data through face-to-face conversations and diaries kept by the participant for 6 years. Farrell (2011) directed 12 reflective group meetings with three EFL teachers at a Canadian university over a

2-year period to identify their multiple professional role identities. These studies are some examples; nevertheless, teacher identity studies typically utilize interviews, with or without other data sources.

In addition to commonly used methods such as semistructured interviews, there are methods that elicit teachers' narratives by providing prompts. For example, Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) employed methods they called "narrative frames" to collect written narratives. They provided participants with a series of incomplete sentence starters with blank spaces such as "*I remember once in my classroom I had a very difficult time trying to* _____" (p. 377). Then, their participants filled out the blank spaces using their own experiences. According to Barkhuizen and Wette, one of the benefits of this method is that the researcher can both expect and control the flow of narratives told by the participants by using these prompts. Another example is the use of metaphors or metaphorical language. In mainstream education studies, Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) investigated the professional identity formation and the development of novice teachers of general subjects. They asked the teachers to describe teacher roles using metaphors and to elaborate their ideas. Thomas and Beauchamp noted the positive impact of their interview studies and wrote, "One important finding of this study has been the realization that inviting the participants to come up with metaphors has given them an opportunity to consider their professional identities in more personal and profound ways" (p. 768). More recently, visual methods, mostly drawings, have appeared as another way to analyze teacher identities and beliefs. For example, Kalaja (2015) asked preservice teachers in Finland to draw their own future images as teachers in foreign language classrooms and asked them to add explanations to the drawings. Kalaja then analyzed these drawings as visual narratives. Borg, Birello, Civera, and Zanatta (2014) used this method to examine the effectiveness of a teacher training course they provided, using the drawings with interviews.

Investigating intangible concepts can be a difficult task because the interview participants may have taken the issue for granted and may not have seriously considered it. In such cases, qualitative interview techniques are not sufficient because when participants are only asked questions conscious recall yields limited data. The researcher needs an instrument that not only elicits information, but also prompts reflection. Adding a visual prompt to commonly used qualitative interviews is one possible solution as it can stimulate participants to engage in deeper reflection.

Overview of the Ongoing Study

Although the purpose of this paper is to describe the method used in the study, an overview of the study is given here to help deepen understanding of the discussion. Farrell's (2011) study focused on teachers' role identities, which he regarded as "the configuration of interpretations that language teachers attach to themselves, as related to the different roles they enact and the different professional activities that they participate in as well as how others see these roles and activities" (p. 55). He extracted 16 role identities that occurred naturally during 12 reflective group meetings held over a 2-year period and further classified those roles into three main categories—teachers as managers, acculturators, and professionals—to illustrate the multifaceted nature of teacher-role identities. The current study, following this trail of inquiry, explored how university EFL teachers in Japan perceive their role identities, how these perceived role identities have evolved over time, and what kinds of factors have contributed to the construction and development of the role identities. However, these issues "are usually held at the tacit level of awareness" (Farrell, 2011, p. 55), and the teachers may not have consciously considered their role identities. Hence, in order to carry out studies like this one, methods that can draw out these issues require serious consideration.

Methodological Issues

One of the strengths of a qualitative research approach is that it can describe complicated multifaceted phenomena in detail (Brown, 2014), but obtaining valid data on tacit concepts can be a challenge. To address this challenge, there seem to be at least three methodological conditions for systematic and valid data collection in studies like the current one. First, a method needs to allow for prompting reflection so that the possibility for participants to articulate tacit concepts will increase. If Thomas and Beauchamp's (2011) assumption is correct, prompts similar to metaphor creation may help participants become more engaged in reflection. Second, the concepts or phenomena are assumed to have a complex organization. If so, they should be reconstructed somehow from the participants' emic view first, then the verbal data should be elicited. In addition, because different teachers are likely to organize the concepts in different ways, participants need to describe their unique individual understandings of how the concepts are interrelated. Third, a method should be able to depict the dynamic evolution of the concepts somehow. Narratives can tell us that changes occurred over a certain period of time, but it would be difficult to capture the extent of the changes. All of these challenges do not seem to be addressed by using only interviews, or at least they are very difficult for researchers to capture.

The Research Method

In order to address the challenges, three research instruments were prepared for use. One was a list of teacher-role identities; the others were two kinds of visual prompt: mind maps and time-series sheets.

In order to facilitate participants' reflections on their roles, a list of 18 teacher roles (see Appendix A) was created, using the actual voices of the teachers (see Moritani, 2018, for a full description of this process). As researcher, I reviewed the definitions of roles with the participants. Then each participant added up to two additional roles. In the actual process of reflection, the participants circled the roles that they felt applied to them and ranked the circled items from the most important to the least important. This process was intended to provide prompts to facilitate teacher reflection.

One kind of visual prompt is a *mind map*. The map uses diagrams and lines to depict the relationships among concepts. Mind maps are sometimes called semantic maps. They can be used as a vocabulary learning technique in which learners put a key word or concept in the center and link it to related words with lines to organize and build their vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001). A mind map can also be used to help learners identify the main idea, supporting ideas, and examples in reading passages (Sterzik & Fraser, 2012). Sterzik and Fraser do not differentiate between these two maps and use the single term mind map. In the current study, a holistic identity as a teacher (worded as "your role as an English teacher") appeared at the center of the sheet given to each participant. The participants then wrote the contributory roles they perceived around this in bubbles, connecting them with lines to show the relationships between them (see Appendix B for a completed mind map). This process was intended to illuminate the multifaceted nature of teacher-role identities.

The other kind of visual prompt, the time-series sheet, was used for the participants to represent their role-identity changes throughout their careers. On this sheet, the vertical axis indicated the perceived importance of roles: The top signified high importance and the bottom lesser importance. The horizontal axis indicated the time sequence: The far left signified the beginning of their university teaching career, and the far right signified the present. The participants chose certain roles and depicted the changes over time (see Appendix C for a completed time-series sheet). It was expected that these materials would facilitate reflection and function as prompts for eliciting the participants' tacitly held perspectives.

These three instruments were used in addition to interviews. Interview topics were prepared in advance. The data were supposed to generate from the participants' explanations of what they wrote and drew, but for cases when important topics did not emerge regarding issues that were being explored in the study, interview topics were prepared. The topics covered past learning experiences, pre- and in-service teacher training, the teachers' relationships with their students, and the connections between educational practices and research activities.

Evaluating the Data Collection Instruments

Using the method explained above, I conducted a study using interviews with three experienced university EFL teachers working at different universities. The participants included two non-Japanese English teachers and one Japanese English teacher. I conducted the interview with each participant in the participant's native language. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants reflected on their teacher-role identities using the list of teacher roles. Following this reflection, they drew their mind maps. After completing the mind maps, the participants explained the reasoning behind their perceptions. I asked follow-up questions and prepared questions when a predetermined topic of interest did not come up in the explanation of their mind maps. Finally, participants reflected on the development of their role identities using time-series sheets and were asked to explore the reasons for the changes identified.

This method used prompts for teachers to reflect on their multiple role identities because these identities are not usually something that teachers readily and consciously reflect on (Farrell, 2011). Farrell (2011) collected teachers' subjectively perceived role identities that naturally emerged in a series of group discussions over a 2-year period. The strength of this approach, which does not utilize any prompting techniques, is that it opens the way for the researcher to obtain words that are naturally spoken and that best represent subjective perspectives of participants, but there are some drawbacks. First, a researcher does not know if participants have expressed everything that they hold in their minds. The primary purpose of Farrell's group session was to reflect on participants' teaching practices; the appearance of role identities in the sessions was, in some ways, a byproduct. It is unknown whether the role identities classified in his study were exhaustive lists of his participants' role identities or not. A second drawback is that the group sessions take time and it is probably difficult to keep participants involved in the study. To resolve these issues, a prompt—the list of teacher roles, in this case—was created to efficiently facilitate the reflection in a relatively short time. Some might argue that the participants' spontaneous and subjective perceptions of their role identities were influenced by the prepared list they were given. However, the use of the list offers a promising solution for making the research feasible because it draws conscious attention to the topic in question and prompts reflection on what teachers do and do not do.

Furthermore, the participants could actually add their own opinions using blank spaces on the sheet. One of the participants added two roles—coach and good communicator role model—and stated that the latter was her most important role. This example is evidence that the list did not impose predetermined perspectives on the participant nor restrict her reflection, but it did prompt her reflection.

Asking the participants to draw mind maps was one of the unique features of this research. It proved to be an effective way to express the multifaceted relationships between perceived role identities. One of the participants explained the relationships between being a *facilitator*, *designer*, *organizer*, and *administrator* using his map (see Appendix B), but the relationships would not have been explored if only an interview had been used, because such relationships had not been anticipated. The mind map made this exploration possible. In general, a semistructured interview is the most commonly used method in interview studies, and interview guides that cover major topics in question are created in advance (Richards, 2009). In other words, there may be cases when the interviewer's prepared topics and the flow of the interview may not cover all the aspects of an issue in question because the researcher cannot predict all of the things that participants may have in their minds. In contrast, the combination of interviews and visual methods compensates for the limitations of using only interviews. Asking the participants to first draw mind maps and then explain the completed maps allowed them to describe not only some aspects I asked about, but also every aspect of their role identities demonstrated on the mind maps. This proved to be one of the benefits of using visual methods over regular semistructured interviews.

Although the complexity of the development of the participants' role identities could not be fully captured, major changes over time could be described using the time-series sheets. In one case, the method opened the way for an important insight (see Appendix C). It would not have been possible to know that this participant used to see himself as an *expert of English* if he had not drawn the time-series sheet, because he did not draw this role on his mind map. Also, the time-series sheet indicated that there had been a gradual change in this particular role identity and rapid changes in the participant's other role identities and illuminated which change occurred first. A phenomenon like this would not have been captured without the time-series sheet, or at least would have been difficult to capture in an interview. Visual methods can aid the researcher in accurately interpreting what the participants mean. This is another benefit of visual methods.

Engaging in these tasks provided the participants with opportunities to reflect on their role identities. The participants were observed to repeatedly refer back to their earlier responses on their task sheets to enhance their sense making. For example, the participants often realized their misconceptions about the importance of the perceived roles while drawing their mind maps. One participant redrew his mind map because his reflection was facilitated by explaining the map he had initially drawn. Another participant, as indicated in Appendix C, redrew the line of the importance of *expert of English* after reflecting on the issue more deeply. These examples illustrate that engaging in these tasks might have allowed the participants to reflect on the issues deeply. Furthermore, in interviews, especially open interviews, topics can deviate from the researcher's interests depending on the flow of the interview, but this was not the case when the visual methods were used, because drawn mind maps and time-series sheets functioned as guides to tell the participants what they were supposed to talk about, as did the narrative frames used by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008). These benefits are not provided by only using typical interview techniques.

As discussed above, the use of visual methods combined with interviews in this study demonstrated benefits, but there were also limitations in using the visual methods. One limitation, as Borg (2015) pointed out, is that visual methods alone cannot extract firm enough data from which to draw any inferences. Also, there are no effective approaches to analyzing the visual data itself. Therefore, this method needs to be combined with interviews or other forms of data collection (see Borg, 2015), just like the current study employed. The current study used two kinds of visual methods with participants, but the resulting visual representations were used only as tools for reflection and as prompts for the interviews, rather than as actual data. However, these maps and sheets were full of insightful information. Further efforts should focus on developing effective ways to analyze the visual methods themselves.

Conclusion

I have discussed the benefits of using visual methods in addition to commonly used qualitative interview techniques. Investigation into tacit concepts held by individuals is a difficult task because the participants themselves are often not fully aware of the concepts or have never articulated them, even if they are aware of them. The participants can answer questions asked by interviewers, but it may be difficult for the researchers to know if the participants have said everything in their minds, or just one part. The participants themselves may not be fully aware of whether their answers represent the issue in question partially or holistically. In such cases, researchers should provide participants with a chance to reflect on the issues in question. The participants' active engagement in the tasks of drawing maps in this study was deemed to be helpful for facilitating reflections. Using visual methods also helped explain complex concepts such

as how they are organized in the mind and how they developed over time. Although there are issues that need to be improved, the use of visual methods has the potential to facilitate studies that have been considered to be difficult to investigate with only commonly used interview techniques.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP17K02894.

Bio Data

Hiroshi Moritani is a lecturer at Hiroshima University of Economics. His research interests include L2 motivation and teacher cognition. He is currently working toward his PhD at Hiroshima City University.

References

Barkhuizen, G. (2015). Narrative inquiry. In B. Paltridge & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Research methods in applied linguistics: A practical resource* (pp.169-185). London, England: Bloomsbury.

Barkhuizen, G., & Wette, R. (2008). Narrative frames for investigating the experiences of language teachers. *System, 36*(3), 372-387. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2008.02.002

Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39*(2), 175-189. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252

Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 20*(2), 107-128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2003.07.001

Borg, S. (2015). Researching teachers' beliefs. In B. Paltridge & A. Phakiti (Eds.), *Research methods in applied linguistics: A practical resource* (pp. 487-504). London, England: Bloomsbury.

Borg, S., Birello, M., Civera, I., & Zanatta, T. (2014). The impact of teacher education on pre-service primary English language teachers. *ELT Research Papers, 14*(3), 1-32.

Brown, J. D. (2014). *Mixed methods research for TESOL.* Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Canh, L. V. (2013). Native-English-speaking teachers' construction of professional identity in an EFL context: A case of Vietnam. *Journal of Asia TEFL, 10*(1), 1-23.

Cheung, Y. L., Said, S. B., & Park, K. (2015). Expanding the horizon of research in language teacher identity: An introduction. In Y. L. Cheung, S. B. Said, & K. Park (Eds.), *Advances and current trends in language teacher identity research.* (pp. xv-xxi). Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Clarke, M. (2008). *Language teacher identities: Co-constructing discourse and community.* Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Farrell, T. S. C. (2011). Exploring the professional role identities of experienced ESL teachers through reflective practice. *System, 39*(1), 54-62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.01.012

Kalaja, P. (2015). 'Dreaming is believing': The teaching of foreign languages as envisioned by student teachers. In P. Kalaja, A. M. F. Barcelos, M. Aro, & M. Ruohotie-Lyhty (Eds.), *Beliefs, agency and identity in foreign language learning and teaching* (pp. 124-146). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kanno, Y., & Stuart, C. (2011). Learning to become a second language teacher: Identities-in-practice. *The Modern Language Journal, 95*(2), 236-252. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01178.x

Moritani, H. (2018). A preliminary investigation into the role identity of non-Japanese English teachers at Japanese universities. *JACET Chugoku-Shikoku Chapter Research Bulletin*, 15, 143-157.

Nagatomo, D. H. (2012). *Exploring Japanese university English teachers' professional identity*. Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Pennington, M. (2014). Teacher identity in TESOL: A frames perspective. In Y. L. Cheung, S. B. Said & K. Park (Eds.), *Advances and current trends in language teacher identity research* (pp. 16-30). Oxford, England: Routledge.

Richards, K. (2009). Interviews. In J. Heigham & R. A. Croker (Eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics* (pp. 182-199). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sterzik, A. M., & Fraser, C. (2012). RC-MAPS: Bridging the comprehension gap in EAP reading. *TESL Canada Journal, 29*(2), 103-119.

Thomas, L., & Beauchamp, C. (2011). Understanding new teachers' professional identities through metaphor. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(4), 762-769.

Tsui, A. B. M. (2007). Complexities of identity formation: A narrative inquiry of an EFL teacher. *TESOL Quarterly, 41*(4), 657-680. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2007.tb00098.x

Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 4*(1), 21-44. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0401_2

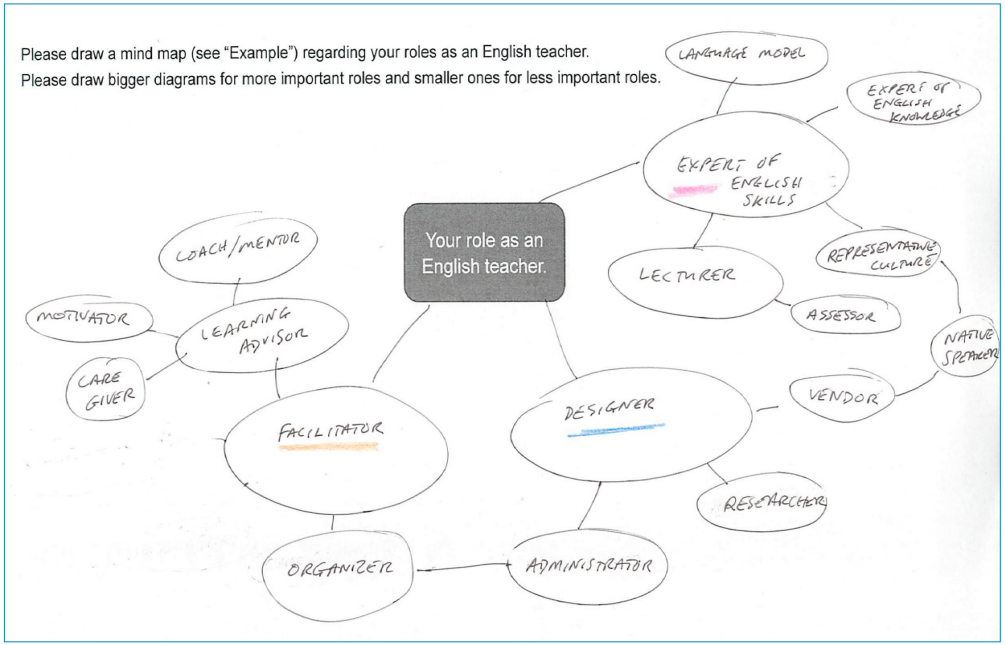
Appendix A
List of Teacher Roles

The purpose of this study is to explore how English teachers perceive their roles in English education at Japanese universities.

Examples of roles:

- ✧ Expert of English (Linguistic knowledge)
- ✧ Expert of English (Linguistic skills)
- ✧ Representative of a culture
- ✧ Lecturer (transmitter of knowledge)
- ✧ Native speaker
- ✧ Language model
- ✧ Entertainer
- ✧ Motivator
- ✧ Caregiver (parental role)
- ✧ Facilitator (guide and assist students)
- ✧ Organizer (organize students to do activities)
- ✧ Assessor (giving feedback etc.)
- ✧ Researcher (research things to improve teaching/ materials)
- ✧ Designer(course design/material design)
- ✧ Administrator (outside the class)
- ✧ Vendor (to sell good English education)
- ✧ Socializer (school party etc.)
- ✧ Learning advisor
- ✧ Other (specify:)
- ✧ Other (specify:)

Appendix B
Completed Mind Map



Appendix C

Completed Time-Series Sheet