

A Novice Japanese Teacher's Identity Construction in Online Teaching Under COVID-19: Beliefs and Perceptions

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Abstract: The present study is mainly focused on a novice Japanese language teacher's identity through online language teaching under the pandemic of COVID-19. Due to the high risks of public health in the U.S. society, all her Japanese classes have been migrated from in-person to live-online since March 2020. In an attempt to fill the research gap in terms of types of data and target languages, this qualitative research study presents the experiences of a female native speaker of Japanese as a novice teacher at a public university located in the U.S. Viewing identity as an entity rather than separated notions, the author conducts both interviews and class observations to explore the participant's teaching beliefs and perceptions of online language teaching, as well as her identity construction and transition through this unusual period of time. The data collected from the interviews and class observations reveal three themes that are 1) the participant's teaching beliefs on authenticity and communication in terms of language teaching, 2) her perceptions of pros and cons of teaching Japanese live-online, and 3) various strategies that she applies to successfully construct her professional identities and transit her identities between personal and professional. Additionally, a discussion about how the novice Japanese language teacher adjusts herself during the special time of the pandemic concludes the article.

Keywords: Japanese, Language Teacher Identity, Teaching Belief, Perception, Qualitative

1. Introduction

In large public universities of the United States, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) of foreign language programs teaching in the classroom is a common phenomenon, and they are often viewed as "students teachers". To explore more of These GTAs' understandings of being good teachers and how these understandings affect/relate to their classroom practices would be not only meaningful to the future development for the second/foreign language teaching of the school itself but be of great benefit to the future career of these GTAs as well. Therefore, in order to understand the complexities of novice Japanese language teachers' identities in terms of teaching beliefs and classroom practices, this study will concentrate on an intermediate level Japanese language classroom taught by a Graduate Teaching Assistant at a University.

According to Kayi-Aydar [7], the topic of language teacher identity "receives strong attention in current scholarly literature", especially in recent two decades. To understand the various complicated aspects of second/foreign language

teachers' identities is essential, because the perception teachers hold for themselves as professionals in terms of language teaching has strong impacts on both teachers' pedagogy choices [3] and their future development [5]. This is also why examining the GTAs' identities as foreign language teachers is of great significance.

English, as a global dominant language, have been deeply and extensively examined by researchers, as well as English foreign language (EFL) teachers. Moreover, English language teachers' identities have received strong attention in Japan through a large number of case studies in terms of institutional demands [3] and educational reforms [13]. However, on the contrary, identities of Japanese language teachers were investigated much less by researchers in the field of second/foreign language teaching. Therefore, this study aims to explore Japanese language teachers' identities to fill the research gap.

In addition, GTAs' identities are also examined by some scholars through the perspectives of portfolio [1] and autobiographical reflections [8]. However, again, these

researches are more focused on languages such as English (e.g., Mercer [10]; Wolff and De Costa [15]; Wong [16]), Spanish (e.g., Thompson and Fioramonte [12]; Kayi-Aydar [6]) and Chinese (e.g., Gao & Shum [4]). Research on Japanese language GTAs' identities could barely be found. Among the extremely limited number of researches on Japanese language, one notable research conducted a few years ago by Shimazu [11] examines life stories told by M. A. students majoring in Japanese language education in South Korea through narrative approach. Therefore, due to the extreme lack of research in this field of Japanese language teaching, conducting a study to explore identities as professional Japanese language educators would be an interesting topic to fill the research gap in terms of approaches, types of data, and target languages.

Based on the research gap, previous studies and the research goal of this study, the author aims to examine a novice Japanese language teacher's identity in terms of self-perceptions, teaching beliefs and classroom practices. In addition, due to the pandemic of COVID-19, all Japanese language classes have been migrated to online since March. As Barkhuizen [2] defined, language teachers' identities change discursively "in classrooms, institutions, and online" (p. 4). Therefore, under this special situation, how the change of teaching site (in-person vs. live-online) and working environment (office vs. home) impacts on her identity would also be an interesting and meaningful topic to explore. Therefore, the present study addresses research questions listed as below:

1. What is the novice teacher's belief of being a good teacher?
2. What perceptions of online teaching does the novice Japanese teacher have?
3. How does online teaching interrelate with the novice Japanese language teacher's identity?

2. Literature Review

Since foreign/second language teachers' perceptions, interpretations and opinions regarding their professional work directly determine their attitudes and methods for language teaching, language teachers' identities as professionals significantly influence the quality of foreign language teaching and professional development of language teachers themselves. Therefore, researching language teachers' identities, especially novice teachers' identities is essential because (1) it helps them overcome the struggling confusions for their lacking experience at the beginning years and, (2) benefits their development and career in the future. In addition, since English is a dominant language, the researches of language teachers' identities largely concentrate on EFL teachers. However, on the contrary, studies researching on Japanese language teachers' identities is an apparent and notable absence. Thus, this study focusing on novice Japanese teachers' identities, serves as a supplementary for this inequivalent situation.

2.1. Language Teachers' Identities

To understand language teachers' identities, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson [14] theorize their perceptions according to three examples of a data-driven research on English teachers and some bilingual teachers. This seminal paper concentrates on exploring "the possibility of dialogue across theories" (p. 24), demonstrating that one theory can be used to inform another. Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson [14] theorize language teachers' identities in two categories – identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice. identity-in-discourse represents identity that is discursively constituted through language (e.g., life stories, narratives), while identity-in-practice is identity actually practiced or enacted by language teachers (e.g., pedagogical choices, classroom practices).

Developed from Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnson [14], Kanno and Stuart [5] also raised two concepts differing from Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson [14] -- "narrated identities" and "enacted identities". They point out that identity-in-discourse overlaps with "identity-in-practice" to some extent since "discursively constructed identities are verbal expressions of the ongoing mutual relationship between the self and the practice of a teacher" (p. 240).

In this study, the author mainly adopts the framework of Kanno and Stuart's [5] concepts of narrated identities and enacted identities through both narrative inquiry and observations of the participants' classroom practices. By integrating these two concepts, this study aims to explore how the language teacher identity of the Japanese teaching assistant is discursively constructed.

2.2. Novice EFL Teachers' Identities

Since English is the lingua franca nowadays, researches on language teachers' identities have heavily focused on ESL teachers. In terms of this topic, Duff & Uchida [3] is undoubtedly one of the most highly influential and frequently cited research. Duff & Uchida [3] conducts a six-month ethnographic case study on four novice EFL teachers at a language school in Japan, examining their social identities inside/outside of the classroom through both qualitative (observations and interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) methods. According to the findings, Duff & Uchida [3] suggest that the novice language teachers always negotiate their sociocultural identities, which are constantly shaped by their past educational, professional, and cross-cultural experiences.

Another widely influential study is conducted by Tsui [13]. This is also a six-month study concentrating on an EFL teacher, but more experienced, through a different method. This study examines the EFL teacher's identity through a narrative inquiry, at a university in China. Tsui [13] demonstrates how the EFL teacher struggled with multiple identities and conceptualizes "institutional" and "personal" identity constructions in the article. Although Tsui's research [13] focus is not about novice teachers, the conception of "institutional identity" and "personal identity" is very

representative and worth examining.

Later on, through the similar narrative approach with Tsui [13], Liu & Xu [9] also analyze the complexities of a novice EFL teacher's identity according to the stories describing how an EFL teacher feeling "included in" and "excluded from" the community (i.e. her department) through her stories. Building on Tsui's [13] "institutional" identity and "personal" identity, Liu & Xu [9] propose and develop a conception of "designated identity" and "actual identity" of language teachers.

2.3. Novice Language Teachers' Identities of Other Languages

With the research on EFL teachers' identities rapidly developed, some scholars also turned into exploring foreign/second language teachers' identities other than English. Thompson & Fioramonte [12] analyze three novice Spanish teachers through a six-month qualitative research. Most interestingly, all three participants are nonnative speakers of Spanish, and they are working as graduate teaching assistants in the universities located in the U.S. according to the interviews, Thompson & Fioramonte [12] particularly emphasize that NS and NNS will "no longer be automatically generated" and "the bilingualism and multilingualism of language teachers should be valued" (p. 577). Similarly, Shimazu [11] also conducts narrative research on novice nonnative Japanese teachers in South Korea according to their life stories. Shimazu [11] points out that nonnative speaker teachers could be regarded as students' role models as experienced and successful Japanese learners.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The participant of this study, Chi, is an M. A student majoring in Japanese linguistics when the research is being conducted. She is a female Japanese native speaker and a novice language teacher with two-year experiences of Japanese language teaching. However, she has never taught any online courses in her previous life and this is the first time for her to teach intermediate level of Japanese. The data of this study is collected through both interview and class observations from March to April 2020. I observed eight classes taught by Chi starting from the beginning of March and ending in mid-April, with the frequency of twice a week. After that, the interview was conducted soon after the last class observation for approximately 80 minutes with twelve semi-structured questions.

3.2. Data Analysis

Firstly, built upon Kanno & Stuart [5] and Tsui [13], I read all the collected data through the notion of "narrated identities"/ "enacted identities" and "institutional identity"/ "personal identity". At the next step, I categorize interview transcripts through color-coding and get it peer. Finally, I integrate both class observations and categories of transcripts

to find emergent themes.

4. Findings

In this study, I found a multitude of themes in the collected data. Therefore, the finding section is divided into sections based on the three emergent themes. The themes are presented as relevant quotations from the interview and the class observations are added for illustrative purposes and to provide an emic perspective. The following three themes are those that are discussed in this article:

Theme one: Teaching belief on authenticity and communication.

Theme two: Perceptions of online teaching due to COVID-19: advantages and difficulties.

Theme three: Identity transition through greetings, Zoom and dresses.

4.1. Teaching Belief on Authenticity, Communication

Excerpt 1

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: What do you think is good Japanese language teaching? Can you give me some examples?

C: Because communicative approach (is important), I regard it as the base of my teaching. The ultimate goal of language teaching is to (help students) utilize Japanese to do something successfully. ...Through teaching in the class, teachers should consider that we native (Japanese) speakers usually use the target language structures in what kind of occasions or under what kinds of situations. Also, by employing the language structures, what kind of Japanese conversations can be managed. Classroom should be a place for students to rehearse before they encounter the real situation. ...To summarize, instead of only using textbooks, I think (it is important) to use teaching materials such as authentic conversations, which are related to real life or students' own lives.

Excerpt 2

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: You mentioned that you had a teaching philosophy, right? So, what is the most important thing you think in your teaching philosophy?

C: I believe it's better to show students real objects or things that are really used in Japan. Additionally, the "authenticity" of the use of language is also important, but it's really difficult (to do so). ...I believe authenticity and communication are the base (of language teaching). I think (these two things) should have been written in the first paragraph of my teaching philosophy.

According to the interview, as excerpt 2 illustrated, Chi mentioned "authenticity" and "communications" eight times for each during the interview. She even emphasized that "I believe authenticity and communication are the base (of language teaching)", and that these two elements were written in the very first paragraph in her teaching philosophy. It reveals that in her cognition, these two topics are most important for teaching Japanese. Additionally, Chi's

perception of “authenticity” and “communication” also reflect on her pedagogical choices.

When Chi taught language structures or Japanese *kanji* by using example sentences, or when she taught Japanese cultures in certain contexts, the subject/main character of these sentences/contexts is always named “Tanaka-san” (“san” as a suffix, meaning “Mr/Mrs. Tanaka”), regardless of their genders, ages or looks. Since the Japanese instructors of this program are required to adopt communicative approaches and immersion learning for their classes, Chi often applied role-play conversations in order to help her students practice Japanese speaking/communication skills. The character – “Tanaka-san” – appears most frequently. Actually, “Tanaka” is one the most popular last names in Japan. Chi often uses this most common name because this is a “real” and widely used last name among Japanese native speakers, so that she could create an authentic environment for students.

Due to the pandemic of COVID-19, Chi had to teach Japanese language classes through live-online completely, including Japanese cultures. Since authenticity and communications are the base of good language teaching in her perceptions, she often showed conversations which happened among Japanese native speakers.

Since the Japanese class is for college students in the United States, one of the most frequent cultural introductions and comparisons are about Japanese students and their school lives such as demonstrated in figure 1. This topic is also corresponding to Chi's perception that materials used in language classes should be what “really” happened in Japan, as well as what related to students' own lives.



Figure 1. Teaching culture within the classroom content. First meeting Greetings. Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://www.erin.ne.jp/en/lesson01/advanced/index.html>.

Additionally, cultures in daily life contexts occupy a large portion in Chi's Japanese teaching as well.

As it illustrated in Figure 2, how Japanese people buy things in the convenience stores became one of the daily life topics

introduced by the Japanese instructor. Because a convenience store is one of the representative symbols of Japanese culture, which corresponds to Chi's belief of “authenticity”. Moreover, people who live in Japan shop at convenience stores very often. If students' have chances to study abroad in Japan, this would be a good chance to “rehearse” in advance.



Figure 2. Video of shopping at a convenience store. At a convenience store. Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://pws.cengage.com/CPReader/View/9781285431970/default.aspx?eISBN=9781285431970#22e67cd9-cfa3-4b30-9030-f820acc946df>.

Similarly, topics like how to behave appropriately when you are invited as a guest (Figure 3) is also mentioned in the class.



Figure 3. Video of being a guest appropriately. Good Afternoon. Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://pws.cengage.com/CPReader/View/9781285431970/default.aspx?eISBN=9781285431970#48ec2a24-2915-4cc6-aca7-95ab0338552e>.

4.2. Perceptions Of Online Teaching Due to COVID-19: Difficulties and Advantages

During the interview, Chi thought overall, teaching online is very tough for her, as excerpt 3 demonstrated. However, she also narrated a large number of thoughts including advantages and difficulties of teaching Japanese through Zoom. For the advantages, her perception is that although teaching online offered a better chance to share things by just a link, she still worried that these online sources might not be

related to one of her most essential teaching beliefs – authenticity.

Excerpt 3

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: How do you feel about teaching Japanese online so far?

C: (Laugh) It's tough. I think it's really tough for me. ...I don't know if it's related to authenticity, but it's easy to share various materials by throwing a link... Although sharing is very convenient, it's difficult to show real things. In addition, for online teaching, it is a little difficult to do certain class activities such as information gap.

As for the difficulties, she held a longer list. She thought the technical issues made her not able to “write nicely”. Because Japanese has a completely different writing system from English writing, such as *kanji*, Chi often needed to write them on the screen to show the stroke order. Moreover, being able to write *kanji* beautifully is generally encouraged even among Japanese native speakers. Thus her worries is also a reflection of her teaching belief on “authenticity”.

as well as the difficulties of monitoring students' temperature and participation made her much more nervous than before. By temperature, she meant students' emotion and the atmosphere of the class. She worried that she couldn't communicate with students smoothly because she couldn't feel the temperature. Therefore, her worries are also reflections of her belief of “communication”. Moreover, she pointed out that unlike in-person class, it is difficult to show “real things” to students since she regarded Zoom as an “unreal” platform in the interview. The “real things” reflect her teaching belief of “authenticity” as well.

Excerpt 4

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: What changes have you made to adjust to online language teaching?

C: I couldn't make detailed lesson plans anymore. ...and then, I got nervous during online teaching. For face-to-face classes, I can't remember clearly, but I think I was not nervous. However, now (for online teaching), I get nervous every time.

Excerpt 5

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: What is the most difficult thing you have encountered during teaching online?

C: (It's difficult to know) students' participation, since you don't know what they are doing. ... It's so different from face-to-face. ...although I can write on the screen, it can't be reflected on the screen immediately due to technical issues. It takes time, and I can't write nicely. So, things are difficult in terms of technology. Also, I can't feel the temperature from students.

Excerpt 6

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: How do you think teaching online could affect your teaching beliefs?

C: I have to consider students' burdens... If I keep introducing new things, students will have to adjust to them. They might get tired, so I have to take that into consideration.

I haven't thought about that before... And then, motivation (is another one). It's difficult to maintain students' motivation during online teaching... It will be good if I think about that as well.

Despite the difficulties and advantages, online teaching also brought some new directions to her teaching belief. She realized as a language teacher, in spite of effective teaching methods such as authenticity and communication, it is also significant to be more considerate to students' psychological status.

4.3. Identity Transition Through Greetings, Zoom and Dresses

Excerpt 7

(R: researcher, C: participant -- Chi.)

R: Almost all the language teachers are working from home due to the public health risks now. Do you feel teaching online courses at home makes/will make the line become vague between work and personal life? Did you have any identity conflicts/struggles while working from home? What strategies, if any, do you employ to help you switch your identity to be a professional instructor when you are at home?

C: I'll change to teacher mode unconsciously once I log in. ...usually I don't say “genki desu ka” (Literally means “are you healthy?” in Japanese). It's actually barely used in Japanese (as a greeting), right? ... I thought it was unnatural, so I don't say this in my daily life. However, for now, I say “genki desu ka” to express the meaning of “Are you really in good health? Are you ok?”. I think it might because of my teacher's identity that I really worry about my students.

C: (During office hours,) I usually do something else while waiting for students to come. If someone comes, the moment when I hear the sound ringing (on Zoom), I will clean my stuff (around the computer), turn on my camera and change myself into teacher mode immediately. This “Zoom” platform may become the boundary of my identities.

C: Dressing is also one thing. When I have a (instructors') weekly meeting, I'll have my upper body dressed up but wear my pajama pants. However, for teaching time, I'll definitely dress myself entirely.

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, all the courses have been migrated live-online, so Chi had to work from home for all the time. Since she lives with a roommate, she does not have a spare room as a study room. Therefore, she needs to spend a relatively long time in her bedroom for both her daily life and all the teaching work. According to her narratives, the pandemic of COVID-19 and online teaching impacted on her identity from three aspects: her way of greeting, Zoom as a switch on identity and dresses for identity.

5. Discussion

For the first theme -- teaching beliefs on authenticity and communication, both authenticity and communication are related to “real”/ “reality” and “native”/ “Japanese people” in Chi's narration. In the interview, she often referred “authenticity” as “real things/objects” that are usually used in

Japan, or the “authentic language (structures)” that are really utilized by Japanese native speakers in their daily lives. While for her teaching belief on communication, she pointed out that communicative approach used in classroom should be considered as a “rehearsal” for the potential “real situation” that students might face when they have chances to communicate with “native Japanese speakers” in the future.

For the second theme -- perceptions of online teaching due to COVID-19: advantages and difficulties, Chi believed that there are both advantages and difficulties for teaching Japanese online. Although it's more convenient for her to share information with students, she still had concerns to whether the online information is authentic enough or not. Meanwhile, her teaching belief has been changed a little after she migrated her classes to online during the special period of time under severe public health risks. As theme one illustrated previously, before the pandemic, her teaching belief was “authenticity” and “communication”, which are considered as unidirectional (i.e., one-direction from teachers' side to students' side). However, through online teaching she realized that students' psychological burdens need to be taken into consideration as well. Therefore, she adjusted her teaching belief to bidirectional (i.e., from both teachers' side and students' side).

For the third theme, Chi found out three ways that could help her to complete the identity transition – ways of greetings, Zoom as a switch tool and different dresses for identities accordingly. The COVID-19 pandemic changed her ways from not saying “genki desu ka” (Are you healthy?) to say it often in order to show her concerns to students. In addition, she perceives this change as a reflection of her teacher's identity. While both Zoom and dresses are considered as a switch that could help her transmit her identities. These are also the reconstructions of her institutional identity and personal identity. Before COVID-19, her institutional identity was mainly formed and shaped in her department or in the language classroom. However, since working from home makes the line between working place and living place much vaguer, the sound of Zoom and her dresses became the boundary to separate her institutional identity and personal identity.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the issues related to the novice Japanese teacher's identity are quite complex. By applying Kanno and Stuart's [5] theoretical framework of narrated identities and enacted identities, as well as thematic analysis approach to analyze both the interview data and classroom observations, this study illustrates a novice Japanese language teacher's teaching beliefs and perceptions on online teaching. Firstly, the participant believes that authenticity and communications are two most essential elements for teaching Japanese. In addition, she has various views on teaching online including good sides and bad sides. The experience of teaching online under the pandemic of COVID-19 also gives her a chance to rethink and to adjust her teaching beliefs from unidirectional

(from teacher-side) to bidirectional (teacher-student relation). Finally, she finds ways to help herself build professional identity through changing her ways of greetings, utilizing Zoom as a switch and dressing differently for different identities.

Since COVID-19 has impacted language teaching and learning from various dimensions, and its influence on this world will be lasting in the foreseeable future, this qualitative study offers a practical method and possible direction on exploring foreign/second language teachers' identities for future research under this unusual time period.

7. Limitations and Implications

To explore Japanese novice teachers' identities, this is a study only to begin with. Due to various conditions and limitations, the sample size of this study is insufficient, and the time length for collecting data is inadequate. For future studies, I should enlarge the sample size so that I could get enough data to analyze and compare. Moreover, the findings would be more convincing if I could follow a class through the whole semester instead of one and a half months. Additionally, language teachers' identities are not only constructed inside classrooms with students but also outside the classroom through interactions with peers and colleagues. Therefore, to conduct a more rational research, constructions of teachers' identities outside of the classroom should also be taken into consideration for future research.

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