

# Three Different Parts of Me: Teacher Development Through Identity Transition and Integration

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This presentation discusses how my educational and teaching background in Japan, the U.S. and UK influenced my career as a Japanese and EFL teacher. It focuses on how three significant changes in my journey have been incorporated into classroom practices. The first was an identity negotiation through working in Japan while maintaining teaching theories and practices gained in the U.S. and UK. The second transition was made through being a student-teacher in the U.S. and UK and becoming a lecturer in Japan. The third change was an identity shift from being a native Japanese language teacher to a non-native English teacher. My journey included culture shock, re-entry shock, a lack of confidence and identity negotiation in different academic settings. Discovering the connections between knowledge, experience and identity and learning how to incorporate them in the classroom has become a strong foundation for my development as a language teacher.

## 1. Starting a Journey

I always knew what I wanted to do in my life. I wanted to be a Japanese language teacher so I could work anywhere in the world. I wanted to become a professor because I was fascinated by the progressive university atmosphere and thought that professors have long holidays (later, I found out they are actually quite busy). I finished a Japanese language pedagogy course for my undergraduate study in Tokyo and earned a teaching certificate. After graduating I started teaching Japanese at an American college where I also studied for my Master's degree in education. I knew I had to get a Ph.D. if I wanted to become a professor, so I decided to work in the UK to experience something new and taught Japanese at a language college, where most students were business professionals. Now, I am back in Tokyo, teaching Japanese and English at universities. With my doctoral degree, I was able to apply and receive a tenured lecturer position.

My 10-year journey to arrive at where I am was never easy. When I arrived in the U.S., my English was extremely limited and I was not even able to order a sandwich properly. In the UK, I had to quickly adjust to make my classes interesting to business people from various backgrounds. When I was back to Japan, I struggled to catch up with the latest situations in academia. Having a professional mindset was the most challenging as I was a student for a long time and everyone else seemed much more experienced and career minded. I imagined that other experienced teachers had "perfect classrooms" where students would learn effectively and happily participate in activities. I always wondered how I could create such classrooms and become an established teacher like my supervisors.

As Kanno and Stuart (2011) discussed, becoming and feeling professional in language teaching is not an overnight experience. It is a long process in which novice teachers gradually realize "what it means to be a language teacher and become increasingly comfortable with that identity" (Kanno and Stuart, 2011, p. 247). A teacher's transnational life experience builds intercultural competence in the classroom and becomes a resource for students' curiosities (Menard-Warwick, 2008). An evolving identity influences not only internal aspects of teachers but also their classroom practices (Kanno and Stuart, 2011). Then, how did I go through such transitions and transformations? How did the identity negotiation process influence my teaching practices? How did I gain a "sense of professionalism" as a language teacher? I would like to reflect upon my journey while exploring these questions.

## 2. Three Big Changes

First was an identity negotiation provoked by moving between Japan and the West. The second was a career change from a student-teacher to a lecturer. A third transition was made through being a native Japanese language instructor to a non-native English teacher. These changes were accompanied by a lack of confidence, as I often felt like a new, ignorant member of society when crossing cultural, occupational, and linguistic borders. A recent survey conducted by the Japanese Cabinet Office (2014) suggested

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that Japanese youth's self-confidence was lower than those of other countries, such as the U.S, France and South Korea. I was the young teacher seeking self-confidence, while moving through my transformative journey. In the next section, I will talk about these three changes and how they influenced my classroom practices.

## **2. 1 Identity Negotiation through Crossing Cultural Borders**

When I moved to the U.S., everyday was full of new discoveries. I had enjoyed creating a Japanese language textbook and lesson plans as a part of my undergraduate studies in Tokyo. I learned new concepts and methodologies in my graduate studies in the U.S. In my early days, I could not read books and write proper papers due to my poor English but I was able to participate in generating new ideas for classes and teach Japanese to American college students. I was fascinated by the concept of setting up "context" in a classroom, which makes students realize it is the time and place to use target grammar and expressions. I sometimes acted like a lost person asking directions or a friend who wants to throw a party. In this way, the classroom became a dynamic place that involved a lot of movement and thoughtful performances. In the meantime, I learned the significance of collecting cultural knowledge for "remembering the future" (Walker & Noda, 2000) as well as my personal experience of living in the U.S.

Later, as my English improved, I started understanding bigger concepts such as the importance of incorporating five Cs (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities) in language teaching (National Standards, 1996), "input and output theory" (Lee & VanPatten, 2003) and different kinds of learning factors and teaching strategies (Ommagio Hadley, 2000). "Meaning baring", the idea that language "must contain some message to which the learner is supposed to attend" (Lee & VanPatten 2003), made so much sense as to why I could not communicate in English, although I was able to say "I-my-me-mine", "she-her-her-hers" or "go-went-gone" fluently. The language teaching theories that I learned from the U.S. were shockingly different from my experience of learning English in Japan.

While studying for my Ph.D. in the UK, I started thinking about deeper theoretical aspects of language, culture and identity. If cultures were "fluid and movable" (Hall 1992), how is it possible to incorporate Japanese culture in the language classroom? What I thought Japanese culture might have been merely an "imagined community" (Woodward 1997), in which shared patterns and rules are not as manifested as I had imagined. I grew in curiosity in the impact of culture upon communication and it still motivates me to innovate new practices in Japanese culture class and deepen my understanding on intercultural communication.

When I returned to Japan, I was surprised how things seemed different. It is widely said that sojourners experience re-entry shock when returning to their home countries (Bochner, 2006; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). In my case, this happened in everyday life as well as in the work place. When I started teaching at universities, the differences in the ways of thinking and teaching that I saw from other experienced teachers lowered my self-confidence. I felt that I still had a lot to catch up with. Japanese students in my English classes were completely different from non-Japanese students in my Japanese classes that I was more used to. It made me rethink and readjust how I approach them in class. Although I enjoyed gaining new experiences, this ongoing process of seeking to develop myself required a lot of thought and challenges.

## **2. 2 Professional Dilemma through Crossing Occupational Borders**

I had been teaching and studying at the same time for almost 10 years. This experience had a great impact upon my identity as a teacher. A positive effect was that I was always ready to learn and improve my skills and I was passionate to listen to professors and observe their classes to learn how to teach. A negative effect was that it diminished my self-esteem as a professional teacher. I was confident with what I was teaching once I stood in front of my students. When I was outside classroom, however, being a student made me feel that I was not the same level as other established teachers.

My background of growing up in Japan possibly influenced my attitude as a student. In Japan, students learn from listening to teachers. Although this has started changing in recent years, when I was in primary school to university, students were expected to remain silent so that teachers could give us knowledge without any obstacles. I received education from the U.S. and UK, but my attitude somehow remained unchanged. Even during an oral defense, I was simply agreeing with my examiners as I honestly thought that they were right and my work was not mature enough. They were the people above me who always give me right advice and direction.

One day, I realized that various opinions from different professors sometimes contradicted each other. I did not know what to follow and lost my beliefs and identity, which affected my teaching practices. I tried too many ideas in one class and it confused the objectives of learning. I tried to imitate what other teachers were doing in class but sometimes it did not work out for me simply because we had different personalities. I gradually started realizing that other teachers were doing so well because they were confident with their own beliefs and approaches. They were confident because they worked hard to develop their own vision, through a number of practices, innovations and ongoing research. What my supervisor from my Ph.D. studies said pushed me even further. "You have to be able to teach what you have learned in your studies. They (other professors) know nothing about your field! The people who wrote these books are just regular people and you are the same as them".

I have finally realized that I have joined a group of people whom I always listened to and sought for help from. I started to join discussions with my colleagues, rather than being reserved. When being asked, I answered questions and expressed my opinions. When I looked back my learning experience, there seemed to be lots of topics to share and discuss with others and develop new ideas

from. My teacher's world may be different from others. I started thinking, "every teacher should be different", rather than "where is the perfect classroom and how can I be like other teachers?"

## 2.3 Linguistic Issues through Crossing Native and Non-Native Borders

Before studying abroad, I never imagined that I would be teaching English. Japanese was my favorite subject and I majored in Japanese language pedagogy and Japanese literature, but I never felt that I was good at English. Even though my English improved and I started enjoying teaching English to Japanese students, I struggled to overcome two major challenges. First, I did not know an effective way to create English-speaking classrooms. It seemed as if it were most natural for my students and I to talk in Japanese, as we were all Japanese living in Japan. In order to break this atmosphere, a lot of energy and consideration was required. When I teach Japanese at universities, I did not have this issue as most students talk to me in my native language.

A second challenge was creating English lesson plans appropriate for Japanese students. When I teach Japanese to non-Japanese students, I create a slot for introduction, in which students discover "new" expressions in a particular context. Then they work on communicative activities to reinforce the target expressions and grammar. When preparing for English classes, there are sections on "future tense" or "countable and non-countable nouns" in the textbooks. There are a number of grammatical drills that are incoherent and not in context. Teaching strategies that I would apply in my Japanese classes, such as context-centered, meaning bearing and meaningful input and output, did not seem to work. As a result, I compromised my picture of language classrooms to some extent so that drills could still become effective for reinforcing grammatical knowledge. I often wondered if native English teachers who specialize in EFL/ESL might have different approaches than my JFL/JSL approaches.

## 3. Finding the Connections between Knowledge, Experience and Identity

As I described thus far, I experienced learning and teaching in three countries: Japan, the U.S. and the UK to pursue three academic degrees. I started my journey as a Japanese language teacher, yet my curiosity expanded into three research and educational fields: teaching Japanese language and culture, intercultural communication, and EFL. I experienced three significant changes and those have influenced my teaching practices and concepts of language teaching.

In the beginning, I struggled to maintain self-confidence, as what I learned from one place was not always effective in another place. Being a reserved student slowed me in developing my own perspectives and beliefs as a teacher, which builds towards an identity. I was puzzled when switching Japanese to English classes because students' approaches to teachers and learning styles were completely different.

Later on, I gradually started gathering pieces together. Through trial and error, challenges and careful adjustments, I realized what I do in Japanese classes can be effective in English classes with small alternations, and vice versa. No matter what language I teach, students should be able to expand their worldviews through learning about foreign languages and cultures. Under this goal, my classes and research interests were not isolated from each other and all the knowledge, teaching strategies, ideas that I gained can be combined to produce better outcomes. Likewise, I learned how to participate in a discussion with other teachers, rather than being reserved. Being able to interact with my students and colleagues according to cultures made me feel more comfortable in talking about my experiences, which are often quite different from other teachers. Listening to others is still important to me, but I learned how to "take in" ideas to strengthen my own beliefs and world perspectives. At some point in my journey, I started seeing a "new me" who can face and manage differences.

## 4. Conclusion: Where am I Now?

In this paper, I introduced how my transitional teacher journey through cultural, occupational, and linguistic borders has influenced my teaching practices and identity. Discovering the connections in my experiences and integrating them into classroom practices has become a strong foundation for my teacher identity. Discovering the way to manage differences was also an important part of the growth as a language teacher. My teacher journey is an ongoing process, which still brings me a lot of challenges, but I have learned how to move forward in my own way. Once I sought "perfect classrooms" that other professors seemed to have. Now it is time for me to develop my own vision.

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