

# A case study of how beliefs toward language learning and language teaching influence the teaching practices of a Japanese teacher of English in Japanese higher education

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## Keywords

teacher beliefs, teacher preparation, foreign language teaching

Japanese teachers of English in Japanese higher education are an under-researched, yet a highly influential group of teachers. A yearlong case study with one teacher, a literature specialist who is relatively new at teaching English, was conducted. Through multiple interviews and classroom observations, it was found that the teacher's beliefs toward language learning and language teaching are deeply rooted in how she successfully learned English and are shaped by her love for literature. The paper concludes with a call for more qualitative and quantitative research investigating the teaching practices and the English pedagogical beliefs of Japanese university English teachers in order to deepen our understanding of English language education in Japan.

日本の高等教育機関における日本人の英語教師の役割は大きいにもかかわらず、これまで十分に研究の対象になって来なかった。文学が専門の比較的経験の浅い1人の教師を対象として1年間、ケーススタディを行った。数回のインタビューおよび教室での観察を通じて、その教師の言語学習・言語教授についての本人の信条が、自分の英語学習における成功体験および文学への愛情に少なからず影響されていることが判明した。本論では、日本における英語教育の理解を深めるためには、大学教師がどのような教育を行っているか、どのような教育上の信念を持っているのかを、質的にも量的にもさらに研究する必要があると結論づけている。

The purpose of this study is to draw attention to a relatively under-researched, and yet highly influential group of English language teachers in Japan: Japanese university English teachers. These teachers generally specialize in English-related subjects such as literature or linguistics (Nagasawa, 2004), but at the same time they also teach English language classes to many university students. These teachers also teach classes required for students to obtain a teaching license, but such classes have come under criticism because many teachers conducting these classes have no teaching license (Nagasawa, 2004), no knowledge of applied linguistics research concerning second language learning or teaching (Neustupny and Tanaka, 2004), and "little actual interest in teacher preparation" (Kizuka, cited in Gorsuch, 2001, para 12). This may be one reason why many secondary school teachers feel unprepared when they begin classroom teaching (e.g., Browne and Wada, 1998). Most importantly, Japanese university English teachers construct the English component of their university's entrance exams. These high-stakes exams are noted for their profound impact on the outcome of students' lives, and they are of utmost importance in shaping secondary school teachers' practices (e.g., Brown and Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2001; Guest, 2000; Nishino, 2006; Sakui, 2004; Smith & Imura, 2004).

There is a clear need to include this group of teachers of English in the discourse of discussing English language educa-

tion in Japan and its reform. However, there have been surprisingly few studies doing so (e.g., Nagatomo, 2011a, 2011b; Sakui, 2004; Simon-Maeda, 2003; Stewart, 2004). This study attempts to open this area of research by drawing attention to the case of one university English teacher, Miwa (a pseudonym), who is at the onset of her career as a university English teacher and as a literature scholar.

### The participant, data collection, and data analysis

Miwa, who calls herself a "literature nerd", is a participant in my wider research on Japanese university English teachers. She is in her early thirties, and she has a BA in English language and an MA in American literature from Japanese universities, and a PhD in American literature from an American university. Data was collected over a yearlong period. It initially included a series of three interviews following Seidman's (2006) protocol designed to uncover the lives of teachers, followed by three classroom observations and two more interviews. Although I only knew Miwa slightly at the onset of the study, we became quite friendly and she felt comfortable enough to allow me to observe her classes and later to speak frankly with me about her language teaching beliefs and struggles. All the interviews, which were conducted in English, were audio-recorded and transcribed. Minor linguistic errors were edited for readability, and punctuation was added to the transcripts. The classroom observations were also audio-recorded and I took extensive field notes. The data were uploaded into a qualitative data analysis software program called NVivo and were analyzed for recurring themes and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994), using Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework of identity formation. Miwa was given copies of the interview transcripts after each interview and early drafts of this study for her approval. Portions of Miwa's data, along with that of other Japanese university English teachers, have been reported elsewhere (Nagatomo, 2011a; 2011b). This paper focuses mainly on Miwa's discussion concerning her feelings about being a teacher and her feelings about English language teaching.

### Discussion

Each of the English classes observed (two reading and one listening) was teacher fronted, lecture based, and conducted entirely in Japanese. Miwa launched into teaching from the textbooks immediately with no personal interaction with the students. She read aloud from the texts and translated each sentence for the students line-by-line. She "re-pronounced" difficult words from the text with a Japanese accent, and students were questioned about the content of the lessons in Japanese, and they answered in Japanese. Portions of the textbook that were designed for student interaction in English were either ignored or explained by Miwa in Japanese.

The post-observation interviews provided much insight into why Miwa engages in such teacher-fronted transmission teaching, even though she is fluent in English and she has studied abroad. Due to space limitations, only two points will be discussed here. The first concerns Miwa's deeply rooted beliefs about the nature of English language and English teaching, and the second concerns a conflict between her identity as a literature scholar and her role as a language teacher.

First, a recurring theme throughout the interviews is Miwa's beliefs that English learning is divided into two strata, one deep and full of nuance and meaning, and the other superficial and practical. As a "literature nerd", she felt driven to study English to read English literary works. She felt that her Japanese professors *really* taught her "language and culture" through fine-grained analysis of the lexical and syntactical details of the reading materials they presented in class. In contrast, Miwa feels that the practical classes taught by her native English-speaking instructors were useful, but limited. She says:

They [foreign instructors] tell you the mechanical way of writing. They tell you that they use the material or the textbook from the [United States] for like English Composition 101. And it helped. But I felt like I'm learning *techniques*, not really language or culture. I was learning techniques from them. So yes. We have to have techniques. But sometimes you can't just keep on learning techniques. It will be boring.

In other words, for Miwa, English learning is a serious matter, entailing in-depth understanding of language through hard self-study and through careful listening to teachers' lectures about language. Otherwise, she says students will gain merely an appearance of fluency, which she feels is superficial, lacks substance, and will not empower students. This, she says, will enable them to only become "secretaries".

The desire to focus on the finer points of English through the materials is the rationale behind her teaching in Japanese. She does this because she believes her students cannot yet understand the broader points of English on their own. She feels such an approach is necessary because students need "every detail and every expression and every new word they can learn." Nevertheless, Miwa is somewhat pessimistic about their progress because of their unwillingness to make the necessary effort to develop a deeper understanding of English. Unfortunately, Miwa realizes that her students may not appreciate the pedagogical approach that she takes in her classes but she justifies it in the following excerpt:

I don't think students really want something valuable. They just want to be entertained or they just want to be spoon-fed something really useful without doing anything. Without effort every day, routine work, you don't get anything. But some people make you believe that there are some miracles and miraculous ways to do it, so they like those teachers.

A second explanation for Miwa's pedagogical style lies in the existence of a strong conflict between her self-identification as a literature specialist and her work as a language teacher. She says she teaches English because she "has to" and because it is "better than nothing," but her passion is for literature. As an undergraduate she refused to obtain a teaching license because she was afraid her family would persuade her to become a teacher instead of going to graduate school. In graduate school she avoided teaching, instead choosing to focus on her study. Miwa "became" a language teacher the day she stepped into the classroom immediately after she returned from the United States with her PhD, was handed a textbook, and told to "teach everything in it" so students could pass a

standardized test at the end of the semester.

Miwa admitted that with no pedagogical training, no experience, and little inclination toward language teaching, language teaching is a lonely business. She says she struggles knowing what to teach and how to teach it, so she attempts to teach everything in the text. She complains that she always "talks, talks, talks ... always talking and explaining ... there is no dialogue. It is just a monologue. Seriously." However, the students' passive behavior may be due in part to her teacher-fronted transmission style of teaching, which encourages students to listen silently as she teaches, and because she withholds her personal self, as the following excerpt suggests:

In the English classes, I feel like I'm against the whole class. So if I give them my personal perspective, I kind of feel ... I don't want to be responsible for whatever I'm saying. You know, as long as it is about a textbook or a material I'm teaching, that's OK. But I don't want to give them my personal opinion about these world affairs [content from textbooks].

Given Miwa's feeling of being pitted *against* her students, it is not surprising that she openly admits that she would prefer "giving up all those language classes" and focus on teaching literature. Nevertheless, her comments below illustrate a belief that her literary background can offer students an important perspective on language learning that may be absent if students only learn English from language specialists:

You cannot have all those ELT majors...I think there is something good in learning from literature majors. *I believe. I hope.* Because language is of course something you can use and probably just a tool...

I was a student once, and I learned from literature teachers. And well, probably I could give them [students] more than just the language [teacher] people. Because they just teach language as language. But literature people can say 'this expression can be found in that', and back then—like this, like this', and something like that. So, I think. I don't know what's its new or something meaningful to them. But still.

*Diane: You are opening doors for them?*

[...]Yes. I definitely enjoy it. Probably not all of them but some of them [students] would enjoy it.[...] Well, that's how I learned language.

In sum, Miwa's self-identification as a literature specialist has a strong impact on her beliefs toward English language learning and on her English language teaching practices. She focuses on the translation of lexical items and the instruction of grammatical details because this is how she herself *preferred* to learn English, not merely because this was how she was taught. Instead of teaching what she considered to be the language learning "techniques" offered by the native-English speaking teachers of her past, she chooses to emulate her Japanese teachers, by focusing on "language and culture," which she considers to be of more value.

## Conclusion

Miwa's bottom-up approach toward language instruction, which draws attention to the minute details of a reading, reflects the success she herself had as a student. As a "literature nerd" in academically prestigious schools, Miwa excelled from such an approach. However, Miwa's admission that her students are unlikely to improve their English skills in her class, and her knowledge that students probably want to have a different type of teacher and a different type of English lesson, is quite telling. Miwa is not wrong in wanting her students to engage in English on a deeper level and in believing that only a superficial knowledge of English will fail to empower them. However, learning *about* English in depth through a few English passages may not be of much use to them either. But clearly, there appears to be a gap between what Miwa considers to be "best" for the students, and what students may consider "best" for them.

This paper considers the case of only one university English teacher and therefore cannot be generalized to the wider population. However, Miwa's background and personal experiences may be similar to other Japanese university English teachers. Clearly, a closer examination of these teachers, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is in order to deepen our understanding of English language education in Japan. Some

questions to consider for future research are the following: What do Japanese university English teachers think, believe, and know about English language teaching and English language learning? How do university English teachers create and sustain a professional identity as a scholar in an English-related field and as a teacher of English language? What is the impact of Japanese university English teachers' beliefs and practices on those of secondary school English teachers? And, perhaps most importantly, is there a conflict between desired communicative abilities of newly hired graduates by industry and the pedagogical goals of the university professors teaching English language, and if so, how can this gap be narrowed?

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## JALT2011: Teaching, learning and growing

### Educational Materials Exposition

The Educational Materials Exposition is a popular exhibition of language teaching materials from publishers and information about graduate studies from universities around the world. This enables you to view and try out materials before you buy or to talk with and get advice from a seemingly endless stream of professionals. This year the EME space will be shared with the various Special Interest Groups (SIGs) that JALT offers. There are over 20 SIGs in total focused on areas such as pragmatics, computer assisted language learning (CALL), task-based learning, gender awareness in language education, extensive reading and just about any other area of language learning and teaching you can think of.

### Welcome Reception

Join us on the first evening for a Welcome Reception sponsored by Oxford University Press and JALT. This is a chance to network and reconnect with colleagues in your field over drinks and light refreshments.

### Technology in Teaching Workshops

For those interested in becoming more adept at using technology in their workplace, the Technology in Teaching (TnT) workshops will be invaluable. These take place on the Friday afternoon but are included in the price of the main conference. Various experts in the field of technology and language learning will guide you through hands on workshops on the use of iPads and mobile devices in the classroom, Moodle, software for improving course management, audio applications and much more.

### Best of JALT

The Best of JALT party proved to be a highlight for many at the 2010 conference in Nagoya and the 2011 event is looking to be a great night again. Sponsored by English Central and JALT local chapters and SIGs, and taking place on the Saturday evening, this is a great opportunity to relax and enjoy drinks and light refreshments as the awards for best presentations in 2010 are given out.

### And even more

A great opportunity to learn from another Asian context comes with the **Balsamo Asian Scholar**. This year, Sonthida Keyuravong will provide an outline of the many English medium programs at schools throughout Thailand and will discuss the validity and success of such programs.

Another conference favourite is the **Job Information Center**, which aims to place potential employers and job seekers together. The centre features job opportunities from Japan and throughout the world with job advertisements and the presence of recruiters at the conference.

**Artspot**, a JALT associate member and theatre group will perform their play *The Time Machine* at JALT2011. After the success of the children's theatre performance in 2010, this promises to be a social highlight of the weekend.



**Appendix****Chronology of Miwa's Lessons**

Lesson #1 (Reading) Class begins at 9:08	Lesson # 2 (Listening) Class begins at 10:40	Lesson # 3 (Reading) Class begins at 10:40
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miwa gives a quiz and collects it when students finish.</li> <li>• She plays the CD that accompanies the reading from the textbook.</li> <li>• She reads the textbook to the students, sentence-by-sentence and explains words and expressions in Japanese.</li> <li>• Students do the exercise in the book.</li> <li>• She calls on students to answer and she elaborates on their answers in Japanese</li> <li>• She plays a long listening text about amphibious houses.</li> <li>• She explains unfamiliar words in Japanese and then plays the tape again.</li> <li>• She plays a third time and students answer three questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miwa passes out a listening sheet with a vocabulary list (in English) and 12 comprehension questions.</li> <li>• She translates the vocabulary list into Japanese.</li> <li>• She plays half of the tape.</li> <li>• She questions students about the tape.</li> <li>• She replays the tape, and explains in Japanese what they heard.</li> <li>• Students answer the questions on the handout while they listen to the tape for a third time.</li> <li>• She calls on students, who answer the questions in Japanese. Miwa elaborates on their answers in Japanese.</li> <li>• She writes sentences on the board that were heard in the reading,</li> <li>• She repeats English from the texts but explains the meaning in Japanese.</li> <li>• She has the students answer the questions on the handout while listening for the third time.</li> <li>• She calls on the students to answer the questions in Japanese and elaborates on their answers in Japanese</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miwa returns the previous week's quizzes to students.</li> <li>• She reads the directions from the textbook in English and translates them into Japanese.</li> <li>• Students read to find main idea. She calls on students, who answer in Japanese.</li> <li>• She goes over the reading sentence-by-sentence and explains words and expressions in Japanese.</li> <li>• She calls on students to check their understanding of the text and elaborates in Japanese.</li> <li>• Students do the comprehension exercises.</li> <li>• She calls on students to answer the questions. Miwa explains and elaborates each answer in Japanese.</li> <li>• Students do exercises comprehension and vocabulary exercises in the book.</li> <li>• She tells students to turn to the discussion question at the end of the chapter. She reads the question in English, but explains it in Japanese. She asks the students if they agree or disagree with the writer. But instead of students talking, she explains the writer's opinion and the reading.</li> </ul>
Class ends at 10:29.	Class ends at 12:05.	Class ends at 12:10.

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