Exploring Japanese University English Teachers' Professional Identity

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I am grateful to Professor Daizen and Professor Yamanoi for permission to reprint Tables 2.9, 2.10 and 2.11, which originally appeared in their article, 'The Changing academic profession in the era of university reforms in Japan' (2008).

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Foreword

This is an exciting and important book. It is so, principally, because it works to demolish myth and to offer as an alternative evidence-based exploration grounded in the study of participant belief and the conduct of interaction. Further, in that it accomplishes this reformulation through the critical presentation of a set of related ethnographic and discursively-based studies directed at a reappraisal of the identities of individual teachers seen through the lens of their narratives of their pedagogic practice. That it does so not only synchronically, through a study of contemporary action, but also diachronically as seen through the history of the pedagogic trajectories of its chosen actors, contributes to its innovative and revelatory character.

At each point in this remarkable account, Diane Nagatomo makes plain her personal sense of *motivational relevancy* – what drives her to her study – but marries that with an exposition of the relevancies of her co-participants, those teachers whose sense of their complex and institutionally-bounded, yet still individual identities, forms the narrative of voices of this book. What we have here comes close to Cicourel's construct of *ecological validity* (Cicourel, 1992), how a discussion of the institutional order governing the behaviours and thinking of participants is continually in play with the interaction order of their practices, each affording and constraining their and our construction of identity. It is this central focus on *practices* within a loose *community of practice* which for me marks out the distinctiveness of this book. What it is saying is that look to what people *do*, and how they *describe, interpret, explain* and *value* what they and their fellow members *do*, if we want to find keys to understanding their beliefs and their sense of identity as complex professionals.

What then are its principal strengths?

Firstly, that it shows the power of close attention to a principle- and theory-based analysis of authentic data – here in the form of narrative accounts of experience, accounts which do not simply tell stories but which reveal preferred meanings and explanations of events. Such meanings are not nonce happenings; as Diane Nagatomo shows in her thorough and focused analysis of the pervasiveness of gendered experience to her women teachers, they construct a history of pervasive and discriminatory experience across professional sites and professional lives. Such processes of meaning-making always embody the negotiation of various forms of capital, often presented in the forms of metaphors that teachers in their narratives of experience construct about themselves, their learners and their teaching. Such metaphorically-laden narratives in community settings of

teaching offer, as here, powerful semiotic evidence of these processes. For her teachers, despite the warmth of her analysis and the sympathy of her reckoning, teaching is a site of struggle among competing identities. Classrooms, we might remember, are always challenging, risky, and at times personally confrontative places.

Secondly, and now drawing on Goodwin's construct of *'professional vision'* (Goodwin, 1994), we draw from this book the importance of emphasising the co-responsibility of researcher and participant to effect an understanding of what Stevick (1980) calls *'a world of meaningful action'* where the interpersonal judgements of teacher and researcher, teacher and student, cohere to provide shared insights into the reasons for action and non-action. This is not just a matter of reflection *on* and reflection *in,* in Schon's phrase (Schon, 1987), it is also the basis and grounds for *reflexive* action, that action which leads to local and systemic change. In this, the book is much more than a rich archive of experience; it constitutes a powerful argument for a new direction, one driven by a recognition of the 'professionality' of teaching.

Finally, this book exemplifies a pattern of research practice which commends itself to other and more diverse settings than the one highlighted here. Diane Nagatomo makes applied linguistics matter in this book, she makes her methodology matter, and she identifies relationships as the core of applied linguistic research. Empirically warranted, authenticated by reference to a wide scope of existing and relevant research, and, above all, inspired by personal engagement, this book stands as a document to the potential of carefully constructed and exercised applied linguistic research to make a difference.

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Professor Christopher N. Candlin
Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
November 2011

Enter the apocryphal Hiroshi Yamato. It bewilders you that although this colleague is an associate professor of English and expert on Charles Dickens, he can hardly speak English. However, this seems less amazing once you observe his teaching methods. He lectures blithely away on discrete anomalies of syntax, pronunciation, and sentence-level translation, despite the fact that few of his students are listening. One gets the impression that he knows nothing of life outside the university, especially since his social world is restricted to exactly three other teachers the same age and one elder professor. You wonder why they are so subservient to this older professor, who seems to dominate them. He not only dictates their opinions, but also exploits them as unpaid research assistants, and yet, Hiroshi 'yes man's' this elder professor's every suggestion and seems unable to undertake even the smallest of academic tasks on his own.

Kelly & Adachi, 1992

I was not trained to be an English language teacher but to be a researcher. It is not only I, but all graduate students of ex-imperial universities in Japan who major in literature. We have been encouraged to study, but never to improve teaching skills! I think this doesn't hold true for English language majors and education majors. As a literature major, I have been baffled at the gap between my graduate school days and now.

Japanese university English teacher's response to an email interview question

1 Introduction

Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this book is to draw attention to an under-researched and yet extremely powerful group of teachers that has a wide-reaching influence on English language education in Japan: Japanese teachers of English in Japanese universities. The studies presented in this book hope to move the discourse concerning these teachers away from the stereotypical and negative portrayal of the apocryphal Professor Hiroshi Suzuki described in the epigraph on the previous page. Such an image is widely held (see also McVeigh, 2002, who calls Japanese higher education a 'myth'), but if perpetuated, it can limit the exploration of an important dimension of English language education in Japan. Instead, it is more constructive to investigate the specific teaching beliefs, identity and actual teaching practices of these teachers who wield a great deal of power over English language education, which influences the ultimate outcome of Japanese people's English abilities.

It is often lamented that many Japanese people are unable to speak even simple English, even though most people have learned English for a minimum of six years if they have completed secondary school, and even more if they go to university. University graduates' lack of English ability has brought forth a great deal of criticism from the business community, who need to invest time and money in improving the communicative skills of their newly hired recruits. To address this problem, the Federation of Economics Organizations in Japan demanded an English education that would result in students attaining better communicative skills (Aspinall, 2006).

In attempts to improve Japanese students' English ability, the Ministry of Education revised its course of studies in 1989/1990 and 1998/1999 and again in 2002/2003. Under its new name, the Ministry of Education, Health, Science and Welfare (hereafter referred to by its commonly known acronym, MEXT) directed an emphasis on spoken communication and the study of culture (Neustupny & Tanaka, 2004). The last revisions in 2002/2003, known as the 'Action Plan', had concrete goals to improve English language education in Japan, such as improving secondary schools' English classes; improving secondary school teachers' English communicative and pedagogical skills; increasing student motivation; creating alternative types of university entrance examinations; introducing English language education in elementary schools and improving students' Japanese language abilities (MEXT, 2003).