The Influence of Biographical History on a Native Speaker Teacher's Beliefs

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Abstract:

The present study investigated the influence of biographical history on a native speaker teacher of Japanese. A teaching assistant of a large public university in the Midwest, who grew up and went through the educational system in Japan, was chosen as a participant for a 16-week long case study. Through data sources such as formal and informal interviews, classroom observations and teacher journal, three major themes associated with the participant's biographical history were found: being Japanese, career and status change, and teaching philosophy. The discussion includes the importance of identifying native teachers' backgrounds and beliefs to prepare them for cross-cultural conflicts that they might encounter in the foreign language classroom.

Researchers in the field of mainstream education have found that preservice teachers bring with them a set of strong beliefs about teaching and learning, and they have attempted to find how strong these beliefs are and how teacher educators could influence such beliefs through teacher preparation programs (e.g., Beach & Pearson, 1998; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Kagan, 1992; Nettle, 1998). Kagan (1992), after reviewing relevant literature from the late 1980's to early 1990's, concluded that teacher preparation courses had failed to provide preservice teachers with adequate knowledge about teaching. However, more recent studies have challenged Kagan's conclusion and have attempted to shed light on how preservice teachers' prior assumptions can be changed during teacher preparation periods (Beach & Pearson, 1998; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Nettle, 1998).

Yet, other researchers have studied how such prior beliefs about teaching and learning are formed by studying preservice teachers' biographical history (Britzman,

1986; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Powell, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1997; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Britzman (1986) questioned the apprenticeship model of education where universities provide theoretical knowledge, schools provide the classroom and students, and preservice teachers provide their individual efforts. She claims that such a model of education is based on a behavioristic view of learning and promotes a particular ideology of education. Instead, she suggests that teacher educators help prospective teachers examine their own cultural baggage because prospective teachers bring to their teacher education "their implicit institutional biographies - the cumulative experience of school lives - which, in turn, inform their knowledge of the student's world, of school structure, and of curriculum" (p. 443). Along this line of research, Calderhead and Robson (1991) found various images about teaching that preservice teachers held which were shaped by their early exposure to education as students. A series of studies by Powell (1992, 1994, 1996, 1997) have also found the influence of prior experiences on teaching and teacher identity. In his 1992 and 1994 papers, Powell found that second career teachers bring their habits of prior work to teaching situations in addition to those of early schooling. Powell (1996) studied an English teacher who was formerly a floral designer for ten years and a science teacher who had been a field scientist for six years. The study revealed how biographical factors have a strong impact on teachers' approach to teaching.

The notion of the impact of biographical factors is important particularly for native speaker language teachers since they are often educated in countries that have different educational expectations from the country where they teach a foreign language. The present study is a case study of such a teacher from Japan who taught Japanese as a teaching assistant at a US university.

Method

Sampling

This study was conducted at Midwestern University (a pseudonym), a large US university in the Midwest. It had large enrollments in Japanese courses (approximately 200 students per semester) and approximately ten native Japanese teaching assistants (TAs), a circumstance which benefited me by providing a large pool of teachers from which I could choose the most appropriate individual for the purpose of the study.

In selecting a teacher for the study, I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). That is, I selected a participant who would allow me to learn the most about the phenomena in question (Stake, 1994). The criteria I established for participant selection were that the teacher (1) was a native speaker of Japanese, (2) grew up in Japan, (3) completed most of her/his education in Japan, (4) came to the US recently (less than two years ago), and (5) started teaching Japanese in the US recently (less than one year ago). It was expected that this would allow me to see a sharp contrast between the teacher's identity as a Japanese and his/her teaching practices in the US. I also took into account the would-be participants' willingness to participate in the study and the amount of time available for the interviews as additional criteria for the selection of the participant.

Data Collection Techniques

The data were collected for a semester (16 weeks) and triangulated by integrating multiple data sources. The data sources include the teacher's reflective journal, a series of formal and informal interviews, field notes from classroom

observations, and artifacts such as the teacher's lesson plans, the course syllabus and textbooks.

Analysis and Interpretation Strategies

Through the repeated readings of the interview transcripts, field notes and teacher journal, I coded data segments, categorized them, and identified themes (Erickson, 1986). In addition to coding on printed data, I used a text editor that was equipped with a special search function (grep) which allowed me to extract data segments verbatim that contained certain words from the interview transcripts, field notes and teacher journal. These data segments helped me sort the data and triangulate across data sources. I searched for confirming and discontinuing evidence across the data sources as well.

Narrative

Themes

By coding and categorizing the data from formal and informal interviews, the teacher journal and classroom observations and by triangulating them in the way I described in the previous chapter, I found three major themes that addressed the issues related to the guiding research questions of the present study. The three themes are: (1) being Japanese, (2) career and status changes, and (3) teaching philosophy. I do not mean to imply that these themes are exclusive to one another; in fact, they overlap considerably.

Being Japanese

Throughout the whole data collection period, Ms. Sato talked about her strong sense of identity as a Japanese, which was strengthened by her antipathy toward the US, which, according to her, had gotten even worse since she came to the country. Ms. Sato explained why she disliked the US:

> I tend to like old things, to acknowledge values in good, old things. That is why I like Japan and the Japanese tradition of placing a high value on old things. That is why I was drawn to Europe, which had old things. But when it came to America, it was opposite ... like a representative of evil things ... it seemed like a country that represents evil aspects of the modernity, like the control-oriented society, standardization and mass production. (Interview, 10/23/98)

What Ms. Sato meant by "the control-oriented society" is that institutions in the US are systematically organized in such a way that employees are always being evaluated by their superiors. However, Ms. Sato did acknowledge positive aspects of the US. "Once I came here, I don't think there is any other country that would let foreigners stay and be so accepting of them" (Interview, 10/23/98).

By referring to an episode which she had heard from a Chinese couple who had lived in both Japan and the US, Ms. Sato made a contrast between the two countries in the treatment of foreign residents. According to the Chinese couple:

> In America, you can manage to go through legal procedures quite easily. But in Japan, it is very strict and cumbersome. But Japanese people who

lived in the neighborhood were very kind, unlike people in Boston... And I thought it made sense. (Interview, 10/23/98)

Ms. Sato's strong sense of identity as a Japanese was expressed at various occasions. "I'm a Japanese, who is very Japanese" (Interview, 10/23/98). "Even if I have deepened my understanding of the American culture, it is a fact that I will never become non-Japanese. I am, after all, a Japanese, who is shy" (Interview, 10/23/98).

> I sometimes get chicken-hearted. I'm ambitious, but chicken-hearted ... yeah, I'm sometimes chicken-hearted, fragile and sensitive (laughs). I feel that it makes it hard for me to live in this country. After all, you got to be tough to survive in this country, right?... I worry and don't have much confidence ... so I don't think I get along with it [laughs]. (Interview, 8/28/98)

Ms. Sato elaborated her feelings toward living in the US later in the same interview:

> I don't think America and I could get along well. Because I grew up as Japanese and learned to be humble and modest and to endure. But here you have to do the opposite, and you have to have self-confidence, and having self-confidence is so hard... I know I shouldn't be concerned about little things, but I tend to worry too much. (Interview, 8/28/98)

Career and Status Changes

Ms. Sato had always wanted to be a literature critic, and as she moved on to

the master's program at Yamato University, her professional goal was to become a college professor in literature. However, since she failed to do well on her master's thesis, she had no choice but to change her professional goal. Until then, she had no other career plans except teaching at the university level, but for the first time in her life, she decided to seek some kind of practical qualifications so she could work outside academia.

As portrayed in her autobiographical narrative, Ms. Sato chose to be a teacher of Japanese to speakers of other languages. She went to a private teacher education school for prospective teachers of Japanese for a year and passed a certification exam authorized by the Ministry of Education.

However, despite Ms. Sato's intention to start a non-academic career, she was offered a Japanese teaching job from a university specializing in the teaching of foreign languages in South Korea and became a member of the foreign faculty there. "In a way, one of my dreams came true by being a college teacher since my status was a member of the foreign faculty... When I was in South Korea, I thought my job was my calling" (Interview, 8/28/98).

However, at the time of the data collection, Ms. Sato had started to feel differently about being a teacher. "After I came here [the US], I am beginning to think that maybe it is not my calling" (Interview, 8/28/98), and this had to do with her perception of status differences in the Korean versus US culture. Ms. Sato described how well she was treated in South Korea:

> After all, I was important while in South Korea (laughs). That is right, yeah, I was a member of the foreign faculty. I was in a blessed environment... in

terms of status. I was a college teacher and my salary was good. And in South Korea, the title "teacher" is respected. And people helped me. I just went there without thinking about it too much and without being able to speak Korean at all. I asked them if it was OK not to be able to speak Korean when they told me about the job opportunity, and they said it didn't matter, so I applied for it and I worked... but I didn't feel any strong pressure to have to speak Korean. I only had to teach so I did not have the pressure to study. (Interview, 10/23/98)

To Ms. Sato, her status at Midwestern University as a TA, though with full responsibility for classes, was a degradation because here she was not a "professor" any more, her salary was much lower, she did not feel as respected by students, she had to deal with such "chores" as grading tests and assignments and making lesson plans, and take care of students like "elementary school students." Ms. Sato went on further to talk about her positive experience in South Korea:

From a so-called college professor to a miserable TA...But, really, I was called "Professor Sato" at the university. And I was a member of the foreign faculty, so everyone was speaking English as a second language, English was their second language, though there were a few teachers who spoke English as their first language, native speakers of English. And when we referred to one another, we tended to say "Professor" since we didn't know one another that well and in the South Korean society, foreign faculty and college teachers are respected, although there were a few people who called me by my first

name. (Interview, 10/23/98)

As these excerpts from interviews and journals indicate, Ms. Sato had gone through and was continuing to go through status, and thus, identity changes. First, her career aspirations changed from being a literature critic to a language teacher, which coincidentally led her to be a college professor in South Korea. Then in the US, Ms. Sato's status changed again, and this time, she felt demoted, no longer a professor, she had become a "miserable" TA and an international student. Although she said that being a student had priority over being a TA, she admitted that it was difficult for her to maintain the balance between the two. "As a TA, I have to spend so much time teaching, but at the same time, I always feel the pressure to finish my study" (Interview, 10/23/98).

Teaching Philosophy

Ms. Sato, who went through the Japanese educational system up to the master's level in graduate school, held a strong belief about the role of higher education:

> Basically, universities in Japan around the time I was a student were thought to be a place where you were expected to study on your own. It is maybe a traditional way of Japanese thinking, like the saying "Steal it, rather than learn it"... how do I put it... it is better to study on your own, rather than waiting for a teacher to tell you to do this and that. So students made fun of those students who actually went to class and took good notes. These students

looked too serious ... If students in the department of literature really wanted to graduate, they could graduate without studying. You earn credits and write a thesis, and you could somehow graduate... In other words, if you want to study, you can study. Students were given a right to choose. That is why giving students lots of assignments was considered childish. It was considered to be better to just follow whatever interests you may have. (Interview, 1/9/99)

This belief about the role of higher education came up at various occasions in interviews throughout the semester since what she was experiencing as a TA at Midwestern University was opposite to her expectations of the role of higher education:

After I came here, I learned that teaching at a university involves having to take care of students as if they are elementary school students. But I guess, as there is a phrase "university kids," this is pretty normal in this country. Maybe this way of thinking... that college students are adults, that a university is a place for those who want to learn, and that those who have potential will learn even if you leave them alone... is dying even in Japan. But I'm getting frustrated. (Teacher Journal, 9/3/98)

As far as classroom instructions are concerned, Ms. Sato repeatedly referred to how detailed the syllabus and lesson plans were. "What makes me perplexed here is perhaps detailedness, because everything is detailed, I'm perplexed" (Interview, 10/23/98).

She went on to elaborate on this "detailedness":

Because when I was in South Korea, I had to do everything by myself, so there were no lesson plans. I just look at the textbook and thought... OK, I will have students do this in pairs and call on students... I would just roughly think about it in my head, and then I'd go to the classroom and have students practice. If someone asked me a question, I answered. I just broadly planned. I didn't give homework, I just interviewed students for a mid-term exam and a final exam and gave grades based on them. On the other hand, here you have to be aware of details... OK, this is today's lesson plan, you have to collect homework first, then do some review before giving a vocabulary quiz, and so on. Everything you are supposed to do is listed one by one, and you are to clear these detailed procedures one by one... Anyway, right now, I really have to be conscious of clearing all the subdivided details and I can't pay attention to anything else, and that is why I feel that there is not much cohesiveness in the classroom. Probably once I get used to it, I feel I will be able to deal with it better. (Interview, 10/23/98)

Ms. Sato did not change her perception of detailedness throughout the semester and still felt the same way after the semester was over:

It's so detailed! That is the greatest difference. Here you tell students that if they turn in their assignments, they would receive 15 points. That doesn't happen even at universities in Japan. I think universities in South Korea and universities in Japan are very much alike. And in principle, a university is

where adults study and as I understand it, you are expected to study on your own. I was not used to this system of taking care of students. (Interview, 1/9/98)

This notion of the role of the university as where mature people come and study on their own was prevalent in the data. Ms. Sato expressed this belief in language teaching contexts as well. At least, at the beginning of the data collection period, she did not feel comfortable about using flash cards and picture cards, which she showed to the class to introduce and review kanji, words and expressions:

I can't deny the fact that I don't feel comfortable using kanji cards at the university level... Looking back, I think teachers used cards only up to the junior high school level... During the first year of junior high school, teachers used them when we learned the very basics of English... they were word cards, I don't remember them using picture cards. I do think they used things like word cards... I think teachers used them as flash cards, but in English education in Japan, teachers don't use cards in the way we do here... As far as the language education I received is concerned, teachers didn't do things that we do here. It was maybe because of the grammar-and-translation approach. Teachers of first- and second-year junior high school students might have used flash cards... I received only the so-called Japanese English education. So, frankly speaking (laughs), I think using flash cards makes teachers look childish. (Interview, 8/28/98)

As shown above, much of Ms. Sato's teaching philosophy came from her

educational experience in Japan. I also found that her ideal image of a language teacher was developed through the exposure to native teachers of English and French at the university in Japan. However, compared with them, Ms. Sato felt that her teaching situation was so different:

> They were literature people, and researchers. But when you do the things we do here, especially as a TA, you don't get that kind of feeling at all... I think I'm doing very different things from my ideal and native teachers that I knew. (Interview, 8/28/98)

Interpretation

The findings show that Ms. Sato brought her expectations of the role of teacher from her educational experience in Japan as a student and as a teacher in South Korea. Both countries held a similar view toward the role of higher education and expected students to be independent and study on their own. Thus, Ms. Sato was perplexed when she found out how much she had to take care of her students "like elementary school students" in the US. For Ms. Sato, grading chapter homework, quizzes and tests was chores that she wished she did not have to do because college professors in Japan would have to do none of these things except when grading a term paper or a final exam.

What is of interest here is that in her teaching practice, Ms. Sato did not show any of the frustrations that she expressed in her interview comments. Ms. Sato meticulously followed the lesson plans that her colleagues and herself made and she did not openly express the conflicts she was having. Even though Ms. Sato thought

the use of flash cards was childish for university students, she told me that she would never say that she would not use them: "I would not say it, never say it. The people use them here and we do team-teaching here, so it is not possible for me alone to not use them" (Interview, 8/28/98). For Ms. Sato, the reason for using flash cards was as external as her reason for not using them. In other words, on one hand, Ms. Sato did not want to use flash cards because it made the teacher childish and departed from her belief about the role of higher education. On the other hand, Ms. Sato did not want to stop using them because her colleagues used them. Ms. Sato believed that she could not actually participate in changing the program. Her dependence on external reasons, as opposed to internal reasons such as her own beliefs about language teaching and learning, was consistent throughout the semester. While she faithfully followed what was written in the lesson plans every day except for a few occasions when she changed the order of activities, she claimed that she changed lesson plans in accordance with her pedagogical beliefs. I did not, however, observe any substantial changes of lesson plans in the classroom. Ms. Sato was more concerned about going through all the activities written in the lesson plans than whether or not students were actually making progress. Asked if she had any beliefs about teaching, Ms. Sato said, "I'm not so conscious of such things; I do things like the saying 'Do in Rome as the Romans do' (laughs)" (Interview, 10/23/98). Although she could not explicitly talk about her teaching philosophy, the data indicated that Ms. Sato had brought her beliefs about the role of higher education in Japan that "students who will improve will improve no matter what" to the higher education in the US. This explains her lack of concern about students' learning and reliance on external reasons in determining her teaching behavior.

Although she could not specify her teaching philosophy, Ms. Sato did have an ideal image of a language teacher:

> Someone who lets the culture of that country faintly hang in the air and help students become aware of relativeness of cultures and values, someone who can interact with students in a calm manner and possess enough knowledge of the language s/he teaches. (Teacher Journal, 9/3/98)

Ms. Sato's ideal image of a native teacher of a foreign language came from the native teachers she had at the university she went to in Japan. She perceived the image she described above from these teachers. What is of interest here is, again, the lack of her concern about whether one's teaching is effective or not. As a language teacher at a US university, she was experiencing a great deal of disappointment from her ideal of a native teacher, who did not have the "chores" of grading homework and tests and who received a lot of respect from students.

Discussion

The present study found an interesting dimension to Amin's (1997) discussion on native versus nonnative language teachers. Referring to EFL teaching contexts, she suggests that native teachers are perceived more authentic and positive by EFL students. However, the present study indicates that in the JFL classroom in the US, being too authentic and too "Japanese" could lead to the deterioration of the classroom atmosphere if the instructor cannot speak English very well. Students in the foreign language classroom in the US expect the native instructor to speak both

English and the language they are learning. In countries like Japan and South Korea, the ability to use foreign languages is highly respected; thus, all that matters is only whether or not the language teacher can speak the language that students are learning. In these countries, native teachers of foreign languages are not expected to know the students' language. For instance, Ms. Sato did not have to speak Korean while she was teaching there.

Throughout the study, a number of questions surfaced which I had not thought of when I originally conceived the study. One is the concept of team-teaching. The Japanese program at the university where Ms. Sato worked had adopted a system in which TAs use the same lesson plans. Although no one had explicitly told Ms. Sato that she had to follow these lesson plans exactly as written, she did follow the lesson plans because she believed that it was the way the Japanese program at this university was run. It did not occur to her that these lesson plans were not necessarily the best plans and that each TA has room to improvise or modify them. This finding suggests that program administrators need to orient instructors new to the program what team-teaching means in the particular program and what purposes the shared lesson plans serve for instructors.

Another implication from the study is that the experience of teaching a foreign language in one cultural setting does not necessarily guarantee the success of teaching in another cultural setting. Ms. Sato had two years of experience teaching Japanese as a foreign language at the college level in South Korea. This supposedly made her a more experienced language teacher than a TA who has just come to the US right after her/his undergraduate work in Japan. However, this assumption may or may not be true. It is possible that a Japanese TA fresh out of college in Japan could

have been exposed to American students who were studying in Japan and therefore might be better prepared to teach Japanese in the US than Ms. Sato, who had had little prior exposure to American students. This study suggests the length of teaching experience in one society alone does not seem to guarantee the effectiveness of teaching in another society. Thus, those who are responsible for hiring new language teachers need to consider with which culture and people prospective teachers have been exposed.

It is also important for these orientation programs to address how preservice teachers have learned foreign languages in their home countries. As the literature in mainstream education (e.g., Kagan, 1992; Powell, 1992) suggests, the present study indicates a strong influence of the teacher's past learning experience on forming her beliefs on language learning and teaching. If preservice teachers come from a society that has a strong grammar-translation tradition, they need to be made aware of the underlying principles of new approaches (e.g., communicative language teaching) that are being implemented at the institution where they teach. Without such awareness, in teaching situations where teachers team-teach and lesson plans prepared in advance by co-workers are given to teachers, teachers new to such a system may just try to follow the lesson plans without thinking too much about whether or not students are actually learning the L2.

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