

The Impacts of a Pandemic on Language Teacher Identity, Beliefs, and Practices in Japan

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching effects on how language education was conducted, as well as on the beliefs, practices, emotions, well-being, and identities of those who taught. Research shows that teaching during this time caused teachers to reconstruct or reassess their identity (Zhang & Hwang, 2023); saw teachers exercising their agency according to their teacher identity (Ashton, 2022); led to changes in teachers' beliefs and practices (El-Soussi, 2022); and restricted teachers' access to other educators (Nagamine, 2023; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). This study shares results from government-funded research exploring how the pandemic influenced the identity, beliefs, practices, emotions, well-being, and professional development of language educators in Japan. Narrative inquiry, a methodology which reveals lived experiences within rich, story-filled data, was used to analyze both survey responses and interview transcripts to identify emergent themes. Looking at the content (what the stories are about), the form (the way they are organized and structured), and the context (looking at the events experienced, the storytelling, or a combination of both) allowed for deeper data analysis and greater appreciation of educators' stories and experiences (Barkhuizen, 2023; Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Results suggest that educators felt various emotions during the pandemic, some positive and others quite the opposite. Even if they did not recognize it themselves, the effect of the pandemic on teachers' identities was substantial. Teachers' beliefs and practices were significantly

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impacted, particularly in how they embraced technology, navigated personal well-being, and took student welfare into greater consideration. Some pursued more professional development during the pandemic, while others withdrew completely from seeking it out, sometimes for the same reasons. Whether teachers moved online or not, they were challenged to adapt their teaching practices and provide adequate, if not quality, learning experiences for their students.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many changes in culture and society. Language education is no exception, with it influencing how languages are taught and impacting the beliefs, practices, emotions, well-being, and identities of educators. It would be a loss for the field if lessons from this period were not used to improve language education. This study draws on van Lier's (2004) ecological perspective as a theoretical framework to identify what was learned during this time and highlight innovations that emerged, as it best acknowledges the nuanced variables of teaching during the pandemic.

Teaching a second language is an emotional experience; thus, emotions must hold a "prominent place on our agendas" (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, pp. 112–113). Emotions also shape how teachers interpret and respond to changes in their workplace (Nagamine, 2018; Reio, 2005; 2011). The understanding of well-being is also a subjective experience. Responses to similar situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can vary because, under such circumstances, each person may respond differently and experience different levels of stress and other emotions (Mercer, 2021).

Definitions of language teacher professional development (PD) vary, but most include continual, long-term enhancement of professional skills. Diaz-Maggioli says it helps "teachers feel more refreshed and inspired in their teaching knowledge and practice, while students benefit from better teaching, leading to better learning" (Longfield, 2018, para. 2). Effective PD must be tailored to specific contexts and needs (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Guskey, 2003; JCCE, 2005; Kinugawa & Tachi, 2003). This means guidance from schools was crucial for teachers during the pandemic. In its absence, the Japanese context and its academic community could also be of support to educators.

Research documenting the pandemic's impact indicates both positive and negative impacts on teachers. The experience led many educators to alter or reassess identities (Zhang & Hwang, 2021; 2023) as well as exercise their agency accordingly (Ashton, 2022). The pandemic also altered teachers' beliefs and practices (El-Soussi, 2022) while severely restricting teachers' access to their professional communities (Nagamine, 2023; Zhang & Hwang, 2023).

Rationale

In 2022, the authors applied for a government grant to research the impact of the pandemic on education in Japan, starting from the 2023 academic year (which begins in April).

At that time, findings from studies on the pandemic's impact were just beginning to emerge, with very little on the Japanese educational context published in English. What little existed seemed heavily focused on the university context (Nagamine, 2023; Zhang & Hwang, 2021). In an attempt to further research the pandemic's influence on education, with particular focus on the Japanese context, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How has teaching before, during, and after the pandemic in Japan impacted language teachers' identities?
2. How has teaching before, during, and after the pandemic in Japan impacted teachers' beliefs and practices?
3. How has teaching before, during, and after the pandemic in Japan impacted language teachers' emotions and well-being?
4. What types of professional development have language teachers participated in before, during, and after the pandemic, and for what purposes?
5. What lessons can we take from the findings to provide more effective teacher and professional development opportunities in the future?

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in two parts: a survey and semi-structured interviews. The bilingual Google Form-based survey was shared online with Japan-based language teachers from February to April 2024. It contained demographic questions and narrative frames focused on teaching prior to, during, and after the pandemic. 18 people completed the questionnaire. That autumn, a call for interview participants was shared online, and 37 people expressed interest.

Narrative Frames

Barkhuizen (2011) defines a narrative frame as:

A written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in skeletal form. The aim is for participants to produce a coherent story by filling in the spaces according to their own experiences and their reflections on these (p. 402).

These frames (see Appendix 1) guided participants chronologically, ensuring that they would answer the research questions while retaining freedom of self-expression. They guaranteed stories rich in detail (Barkhuizen, 2011).

Analysis

Narrative inquiry and thematic analysis were used to analyze both sets of data. Doing so allowed emergent themes to be identified alongside pre-determined ones. Looking at what the participant spoke about (content), how the stories were organized (form), the events experienced, and the style of storytelling (context) made a greater appreciation of the stories possible (Barkhuizen, 2023; Barkhuizen et al., 2013).

Representative Results

Survey Participants

There were 18 survey respondents, 11 identifying as women and seven as men. We hoped for a diversity of responses; however, the tertiary level was overwhelmingly represented. Sixteen participants taught at universities, one at junior high, two at elementary school, one at *eikaiwa* (conversation school), and two taught private lessons. Fourteen participants were employed full-time during the pandemic, three part-time, and one taught both. All but two teachers had taught for 16 years or more.

Interview Participants

Twenty participants were randomly selected to participate in semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2). Although selection was random, priority was given to educators from settings underrepresented in survey responses, especially those unaffiliated with universities. Of those invited, only 17 participated: eight women, eight men, and one non-binary person. Their teaching backgrounds were also diverse, from children to adults. Participants worked part-time, full-time, or a combination of the two. University participants mainly taught online throughout the pandemic, whereas the teachers of younger learners taught predominantly face-to-face. Regarding experience, all participants were mid- to late-career.

Findings

Unsurprisingly, results suggest that educators had mixed experiences and emotions during the pandemic. For some, it was a time of calm, bonding with family or establishing new routines. Others experienced anxiety, overwhelming stress, and even financial insecurity. Even when they did not recognize it themselves,

the pandemic's impact on teachers' identities was substantial. Teachers' beliefs and practices were significantly impacted, particularly in how they embraced technology, navigated personal well-being, and took student welfare into greater consideration. Those familiar with technology were generally more comfortable with the necessary adaptations, though most rose to the challenge. The context in which teachers taught and their position within it (e.g. part-time, full-time, leadership role, regular teacher) seemed to influence their level of teacher agency and how much guidance they were given. The survey, with more university educators, indicated more of a move online, the interviews, with a more balanced representation at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, revealed more of a mix between online, hybrid, and face-to-face. Whether teachers moved online or not, they adapted their teaching practices and provided adequate, if not quality, learning experiences for their students. Post-pandemic, closer attention to mental health for both themselves and students stands as a major change in the practice of many educators. Some pursued more PD during the pandemic, while others withdrew completely from seeking it out, sometimes for the same reasons. Furthermore, those with language ability or technology training frequently became the ones responsible for providing PD to others.

Conclusion

The pandemic accelerated change, though inconsistently, across the Japanese education system. Unfortunately, while some innovations were embraced, other practices have reverted back. Nevertheless, it spotlighted the realities that educators and students faced. The education system demanded much of its teachers and, at times, set unrealistic expectations. The pandemic's additional stressors made ignoring limitations impossible. The cognitive load of teaching online limited the amount of content covered and the technology learning curve frequently overwhelmed both students and teachers. The stress of being isolated was an additional burden. For many, this experience culminated in a more holistic acceptance of students and better discernment about their own well-being. Moving forward, those in charge of making policies and the institutions that implement them would serve both students and instructors well by being more sensitive to and accommodating of well-being while being realistic in what they ask of teachers vis-à-vis the support they are willing to provide.

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Appendix 1

Survey Question & Narrative Frames

1. How long have you been in the English teaching profession? 英語教師になって何年になりますか？
 0–5 years 0年–5年, 6–10 years 6年–10年, 11–15 years 11年–15年, 16–20 years 16年–20年, 21–25 years 21年–25年, 26–30 years 26年–30年, 31–35 years 31年–35年, 36–40 years 36年–40年, 41+ years 41年+
2. How long have you been teaching in Japan? いつから日本で教えているのですか？
 0–5 years 0年–5年, 6–10 years 6年–10年, 11–15 years 11年–15年, 16–20 years 16年–20年, 21–25 years 21年–25年, 26–30 years 26年–30年, 31–35 years 31年–35年, 36–40 years 36年–40年, 41+ years 41年+
3. If you've taught elsewhere, where and for how long? 日本以外で教えていたことがあるなら、どこで、どれくらいの期間教えていたのですか？
4. What level do you teach at? (ex. primary school, university, cram school, eikaiwa) どのレベルで教えているのですか？(例：小学校、大学、塾、英会話)
5. During the pandemic, how were you employed as a teacher? COVID-19 パンデミックの最中、あなたは教師としてどのように働いていましたか？
 full-time 常勤・正社員, part-time 非常勤・パート, Other その他
6. How are you currently employed as a teacher? 現在、教師としてどのように働いていますか？
 full-time 常勤・正社員, part-time 非常勤・パート, Other その他
7. How do you identify? (e.g. man, woman, non-binary, prefer to self-describe) あなたはどのようなジェンダー・アイデンティティ？(例：男性、女性、ノンバイナリー、自己申告を希望する)

Narrative Frames - Before COVID-19

Before COVID-19, in terms of teaching beliefs, I thought _____ was/were important. I thought this because _____. Teaching my lessons made me feel _____. I often taught lessons using a _____ approach. I like this teaching method because _____. Technology played a _____ role in my classroom. Personally, the way I used technology in my classroom was _____. My students used technology in the classroom _____ because _____. One way I engaged in professional development before the pandemic was _____. I found this useful for my development because it (+ verb) _____.	COVID以前は、指導信念の観点から、私は〇〇が重要だと考えていた。その理由は〇〇。レッスンをしていると、〇〇な気分になった。私はよく〇〇のアプローチでレッスンをした。私がこの教授法を気に入っているのは、〇〇だからだ。テクノロジーは私の教室で〇〇役割を果たした。個人的に、私が教室でテクノロジーを使う方法は〇〇だった。私の生徒が教室でテクノロジーを〇〇（頻度）使ったのは〇〇（理由）からです。パンデミックの前に私がプロフェッショナル・デベロップメントに取り組んだ方法のひとつは〇〇だった。その方法を活用して何が得られましたか？
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Narrative Frames - During COVID-19

Teaching my lessons during the pandemic made me feel _____. I did/did not switch to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). This is because _____. At that time, in terms of teaching beliefs, I thought _____ was/were important. It was/They were important because _____. An adaptation I made to my teaching practices during the pandemic was _____. One way I engaged in professional development that I stopped doing during the pandemic is _____. I stopped because _____. One professional development event/activity I engaged in was _____. This made me feel _____. I felt this way because _____.	私はCOVID-19 パンデミック時にレッスンを教えしていた時に〇〇を感じた。緊急遠隔指導(ERT)に切り替えた / 切り替えなかった。その理由は〇〇。当時、指導信念の観点から、私は〇〇が重要だと考えていた。重要だったのは〇〇からだ。Covid-19パンデミック時に私が行った教育方法の変更は、〇〇であった。COVID-19パンデミック時にやめてしまったプロフェッショナルデベロップメントの方法のひとつは〇〇だ。辞めた理由は〇〇だ。私が参加したプロフェッショナル・デベロップメントイベント / 活動のひとつは、〇〇だった。それは私を〇〇に感じさせた。私はこう感じた理由は～だ。
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Narrative Frames - After COVID-19

When I look back on my teaching during the pandemic, I feel _____. Something that I started doing in my classes during the pandemic that I have continued to this day is _____. Something I stopped doing once the pandemic ended was _____. I feel that my teaching beliefs _____ changed post-pandemic.

This is because _____. I feel that my teaching practices _____ changed post-pandemic. This is because _____. One change to professional development that happened as a result of the pandemic, which I want to continue, is _____. One change in teaching or professional development that happened as a result of the pandemic that I would not continue is _____. I wouldn't do it now because _____.

パンデミック時の指導や教え方を振り返ると、私は〇〇と感じる。COVID-19パンデミック最中に私が授業で始めたことで、今日まで続けていることは〇〇だ。COVID-19パンデミックが終わってから私がやめたことは、〇〇だった。私の指導信念は、パンデミック後は〇〇と感じている。その理由は〇〇。私の指導法は、パンデミック後は〇〇と感じている。その理由は〇〇。COVID-19パンデミックを契機としたプロフェッショナル・デベロップメントの変化で、私が今後も継続させたいと考えているもののひとつに、〇〇がある。COVID-19パンデミックを契機としたプロフェッショナル・デベロップメントの変化で、私が今後も継続しないと思うもののひとつは、〇〇だ。継続しない理由は〇〇だ。

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

面接の質問 (Interview Questions)

Demographic Questions

1. How do you identify in terms of nationality? あなたはどこの国で生まれ育ちましたか？
2. How do you identify in terms of gender? あなたの性自認を教えてください。
3. How long have you been in the English teaching profession? 英語教師になって何年になりますか？
4. How long have you been teaching in Japan? いつから日本で教えているのですか？
5. What level do you teach at? (ex. primary school, university, cram school, eikaiwa) どのレベルで教えているのですか？(例：小学校、大学、塾、英会話)

Beliefs and Practices

1. What was a typical lesson for you before the pandemic? パンデミック以前の通常のレッスンはどのようなものでしたか？
2. Could you tell us what a typical lesson was like for you during the pandemic? パンデミック時の通常のレッスンはどのようなものでしたか？ (1)(3)
3. Could you tell us what your lessons are like now? 現在のレッスンについて教えてください。
4. How interested/engaged were you in your lessons?
 - a. How do you think the pandemic affected your level of engagement in planning?
 - b. How do you think the pandemic affected your level of engagement in teaching?
 - c. How do you think the pandemic affected your students' level of engagement in lessons?
5. Engagement: degree of attention, curiosity, interest, passion, & optimism-extends to motivation?
 - a. Behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (NAIS)

Identity, emotions, and well-being

1. How did the experience of being a teacher or teaching during the pandemic affect you? 教師として、あるいはパンデミック中に教えるという経験は、あなたにどのような影響を与えましたか？
2. How, if at all, did you feel you changed as a teacher during the pandemic? Post-pandemic? パンデミック中、教師としてどのように変わったと感じましたか？パンデミック後は？
3. How did you feel teaching before the pandemic? During the pandemic? After it? パンデミック以前はどのように教えていましたか？パンデミック中は？パンデミックの後は？
4. Who did you talk to about your experiences as an educator before, during, or after the pandemic? パンデミックの前、最中、あるいは後に、教育者としての経験について誰に話をしましたか？

Professional Development

1. How did you engage in professional development before the pandemic? パンデミック以前は、どのように専門家としての能力開発に取り組んでいましたか？
2. What were you most worried about in terms of PD during the pandemic? パンデミック中、PDに関して最も心配していたことは何ですか？
3. How did you engage in professional development during the pandemic? パンデミックの最中、どのようにPDに取り組みましたか？
4. Have you continued any PD you were engaging in during the pandemic? パンデミック中に取り組んでいたPDは継続しましたか？
5. What types of PD, if any, are you currently engaging in? 現在携わっているPDがあれば、どのようなものですか？