

Narrative of Identity Transformation: A Case Study on a Native Assistant Language Teacher in a Japanese Junior High School

外国人指導助手の語りから分析するアイデンティティ変容に関する研究

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Abstract

This study explores the professional development of native English language teachers in Japanese public schools. In particular, the process of their identity formation as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) is investigated through analyses of their narratives. Native English teachers have been employed and placed in public schools through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program since 1987. Their role in the classroom is to co-teach with and assist Japanese teachers of English. However, their prior teaching experiences vary. Given their diverse professional expertise, how do ALTs position themselves in the classroom and develop their identities? To answer this question, this study employs poststructuralist concept of identity. Norton (2000, p.5) defines identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future.” In the case of ALTs, their identity may be implicated in their investment in the classroom. To investigate ALTs’ investment and how their identities are negotiated, the author conducted semi-informal interviews with an ALT over two years. A qualitative analysis of her narrative highlighted how she created or (re)constructed her identity as an ALT and positioned herself in the classroom. It also revealed how the change of the social relationships in the classroom affected her engagement in lessons and empowered her as an ALT.

1. Introduction

Since 1987, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) ¹ has promoted the plan to develop global human resources in Japan. In that year, MEXT launched the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET Program) through which English native speakers

began to be hired as ALTs to teach English at junior and senior high schools in Japan. It enabled Japanese public schools to have team-taught language lessons with ALTs and Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). Moreover, with the reformation of the Course of Study in 2011, public elementary schools started to have ALTs in their English activity lessons as well, with the ALTs practicing team-teaching with Japanese homeroom teachers. In those situations, the pressing issues for JTEs and ALTs are to discuss what kinds of lessons are appropriate for each classroom, to determine how to develop their language lessons and achieve teaching goals, and to discover how they can construct relationships among participants in the classroom.

Varghese (2001) indicates that bilingual and foreign language teachers' professional identity has only recently appeared as the research topic of language teacher education. In recent years, many researchers have examined language teaching with ALTs in Japanese schools. Simon-Maeda (2011), for example, illustrates her own language teaching experience as an ALT in a public school in Japan. She captures her position from three different points of view: as a native English speaker, as a learner of the Japanese language, and as a member of the Japanese community. Fujimoto-Adamson (2010) described the roles and responsibilities of JTEs and ALTs in the classroom and demonstrates their relationship during English teaching as a case study. He points out an unequal relationship between team-teachers at the local level, as well as the extent to which local Japanese teacher intervention is necessary in classroom exchanges. On the other hand, Tajino and Tajino (2000) views team-teaching by ALTs and JTEs as team-learning in language teaching, and defines the set of an ALT and a JTE as a "team." Their study suggests that, through the sharing of teaching ideas and their own cultural values, the linguistic difference between a native-speaking teacher and a non-native-speaking teacher naturally leads teachers through the process of teacher development. Most of these studies highlights the social relationship in language teaching and learning in the classroom. Now that there is a growing body of research on Assistant Language Teachers in Japan, it is time to step back and consider ALTs in their own right.

Based on the above discussion, three research questions were formulated. To answer these questions, this study offers a qualitative analysis of an ALT's narrative data over two years. (1) How do they create relationships with students, Japanese teachers of English and other teachers at school? (2) What influences their teaching in Japanese classrooms? (3) In a specifically situated language teaching setting, how can they construct and/or reconstruct their own professional identity as ALTs?

2. Data Sources

Multiple sources of data were collected for this study. These included two informal interviews with a female ALT (Ms. M) in a public junior high school, who started teaching as an ALT after coming to Japan in April 2012; written questionnaires answered by 40 students who participated in the lessons; and a final written assignment completed by students. As some extra data, there were three recorded lessons as visual resources, and 40 visual resources of interview tests

with students. The main data collected in this study, two interviews with the ALT, were narratives provided by Ms. M. She traced her “stories” about her life in the language classroom, such as how she experienced language teaching and learning, what she thought about her experiences in the classroom, and what joy, fulfilment, struggles, and confusion she experienced. Collecting and analyzing narrative data provides access to her own understandings about her experiences and learning. The research of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) on the use of narrative inquiry as a form of professional development provides a powerful example of how the “retelling” of stories and experiences is important for personal growth and change. They viewed the relationship between “living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story” (p. 71) as essential to the professional development of teachers.

3. Method of analysis

To answer the research question formulated above, narrative data were obtained from ALT interviews, students’ written questionnaires, and students’ written assignments. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed qualitatively, referring to Grounded Theory Approach. Firstly, the transcribed interviews were segmented into individual idea units for coding. Then each segment was decontextualized from the original context and coded. There were 243 coded segments for the first informal interview and 90 segments for the second informal interview. In this article, the numbers given to narrative data in the next section are these coded segments’ numbers. Throughout the data coding, the meanings that the teacher and students attempted to express were identified and organized into initial thematic categories. These categories were analyzed in order to determine the relationships among them. Thus, it was through a grounded microanalysis that the coded segments were grouped into newly-constructed conceptual categories. The relationships among the categories were then visually depicted in diagrams, in order to represent the ALT’s transformation of her identity in her own professional development. After completing the diagrams based on two interviews, they were discussed with Ms. M to confirm whether they exactly expressed her own ideas, thoughts, feelings, and changes. In the diagram showing Ms. M’s identity transformation in her teaching life in Japan, her specific investment, which is discussed in a later section, became a trigger to construct her identity in the language classroom.

4. Results of Analysis

4.1 Perception toward language teaching

The analysis of the interview data from the first interview revealed the relationship among the concepts of Ms. M’s teaching as shown in Figure 1, in which her concepts were categorized into five areas: comparison of teaching styles, relationships among participants, understandings in language teaching, struggles with Japanese, and awareness of the value of being in the classroom.

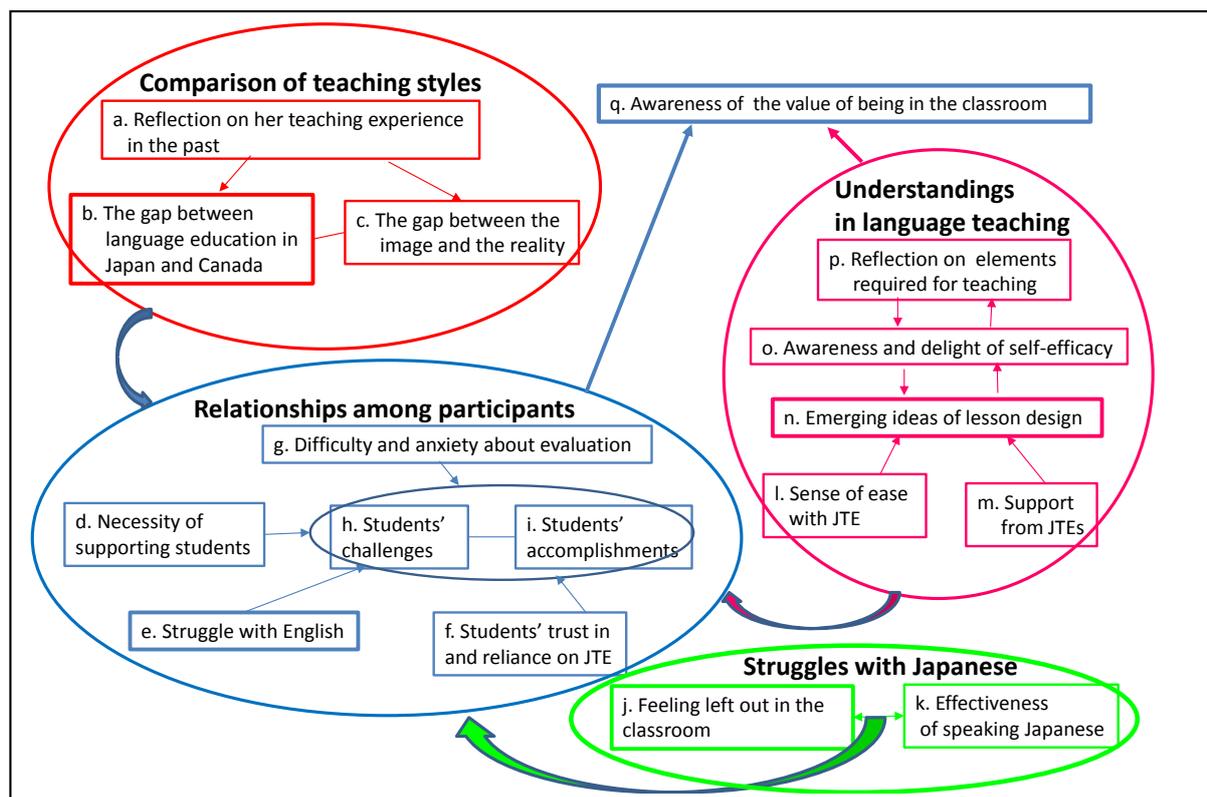


Figure 1. The ALT's conceptual landscape in her teaching: from the first interview

In these categories, four of them include more detailed concepts in her teaching.

Due to the limit of the available pages, in the diagram of the first interview, I focus on the category of understandings in language teaching. At the beginning of her teaching in Japan, she objectively compared some teaching and learning experiences, but the analysis tells us that her viewpoints of the classroom were changed little by little, adapting herself to the new teaching context. Small triggers gradually encouraged changes in her. One kind of trigger was requests from a Japanese teacher of English to make original teaching materials. She reflected on that as below.

84 “Actually, at first I only did it when I was asked to, so if you asked me to do listening, then I would just make one.”

At the beginning of her teaching in Japan, she couldn't determine the explicit purpose of her teaching activities, and what she did in the classroom was only what she was asked to do by a JTE before the class. However, when a JTE who team-taught with her advised her to have or create her own activities in the class, she started to change her thoughts about lessons, as seen in data 86.

86 “but then you said ‘Oh, if you can use grammar and vocab from their learning...from their

recent learning, that's best.' And it clicked and I realized 'Oh, I should have something specifically for that grammar.'”

Once she became aware of her role and teaching goals in each lesson, she started to ask a JTE about her teaching and discuss the teaching goals of every lesson with her. She also created her own original teaching materials for helping students develop their English pronunciation. After trying her new teaching materials, she had reflection time with JTEs, revised, tried the revised version again, and watched students' reactions while changing herself. In her teaching, she developed her emerging ideas of lesson design ((n) in Figure 1). She sometimes thought of the role of ALTs as in data 87: “I think that our role as a JET (the Japan Exchange and Teaching (Program)) is cultural exchange.” She added,

87 “So this is the kind of thing they want us to do, teach culture in class, but I don't wanna just... but I wanna make it relevant to the language, so this is a good chance to merge [in] something personal. Like this is why I'm here.”

The words “This is why I'm here.” expose that she started to be aware of the meaning of being there as an ALT and her effectiveness in the classroom. Moreover, she was struggling to break through and understand the meaning of being with students in the class, and how to make herself understood to students. At the same time, she also reflected on her own “added value,” “This is why I'm here.” with many struggles in data 220.

In the categories of “understandings in language teaching,” using her new materials made her aware of self-efficacy ((o) in Figure 1), and she started to develop her insights into teaching practice. Her attitudes toward the classroom had changed from passive to active. It could be said that a transformation occurred in her view of the classroom.

4.2 Change of her own teaching theory

In Figure 1, her concept of understandings in language teaching was a simple one. On the other hand, in Figure 2 resulted from the second interview, which was narrated almost one year after the first one, the category of her theory of teaching in the classroom became the core concept in her diagram (Figure 2). In this main category in this diagram, there is a cycle which includes (e) awareness and discovery from reflection, the process of (f) challenging herself in teaching, (g) constructive change in teaching, and (h) learning from practice. Through this cycle, she creates her theory of teaching in the classroom. Sakamoto (2011) argues that the “cognitive loop of awareness” circulates back with continuing feedback to create a renewed sense of teacher awareness. In Ms. M's diagram, that loop emerges in the second interview, and an analysis of the second interview data shows that she firstly experienced awareness and discovery from reflection ((e) in Figure 2)

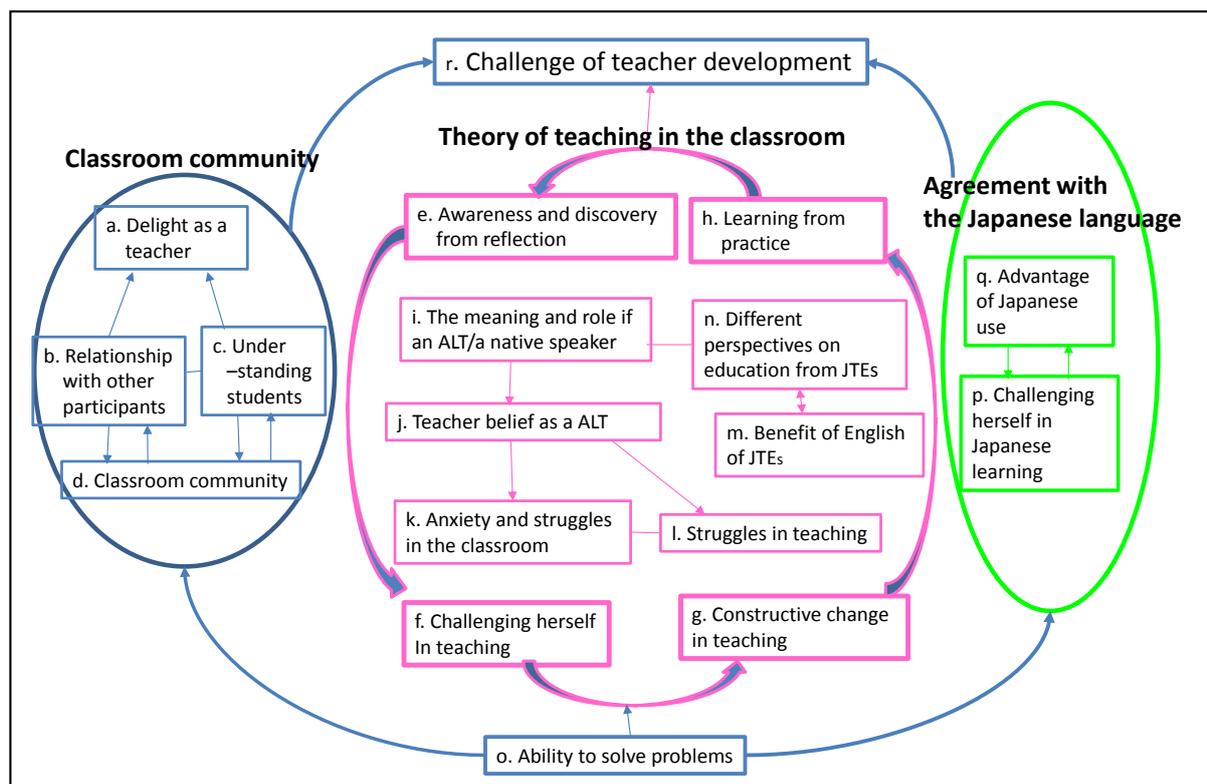


Figure 2. The ALT's conceptual development in her teaching: from the second interview

through everyday practice as below in data 62.

62 “Actually, for most of the past year I think I’ve been thinking, ‘We planned to do this activity. I helped the JTE execute it smoothly, and provided my own contribution. I did a good job.’ But now I’m starting to realize that just executing the plan smoothly doesn’t make my teaching a success.”

Her viewpoint toward her teaching has changed from passive to active, and in executing the teaching plan smoothly, she begins to pursue what she wants to do in the class, not just what she is asked to by a colleague JTE. The analysis of the second narrative shows that her agency as a teacher in the classroom has gradually emerged. Her awareness also becomes a trigger to take a further step in her professional development. She started to study in a graduate course during the second year of her teaching contract, and it was her new challenge to know more about teaching and learning conceptually and systematically. She reflected on her teaching and saw herself critically as below.

61 “The way I can tell that I’m developing is that I look back on the past and can see all the things I’ve been doing wrong!”

Moreover, in data 55, thinking of her learning in the master's course, she accepted her awareness of her view of teaching.

55 "To be honest, starting this certificate made me suddenly realize how small my view of teaching English really is."

Furthermore, she starts to reflect on what she did in the class before, and think about revising in order to adjust to students' learning stage in the class, as seen in data 9.

9 "Now that I'm in my second year, I sometimes go back to old dictation exercises and reuse them for practice before exams. However, I noticed that with my older dictation activities, I have to revise them quite a bit in order to include more of the target grammar."

By challenging herself in teaching ((f) in Figure 2), she changes her way of teaching in class or designing activities, and this is her constructive change in teaching ((g) in Figure 2), which is confirmed by her findings through the reflection upon everyday practice. She reflected on her constructive change in teaching.

4 "I think that the language used in my dictation activities is now more appropriate to the students' learning level. When I first started writing them, I didn't always use appropriate grammar and vocabulary, but now I try to plan them very carefully so they include target grammar and vocabulary."

She noticed that she has different goals to execute lessons smoothly, and she started to discover her own teaching goals. Her change of teaching is based on her analysis or understandings of actual students' learning needs and the purpose of each of the activities in the class. Therefore, she gains new confidence that what she is doing in the class is appropriate and necessary in the real classroom, that is, for the students who are sitting in front of her. This cognitive loop of teaching English brings her new learning from practice ((h) in Figure 2) as in data 65.

65 "Lately I've been thinking a lot about the fact that teaching is not just lecturing but also assessing, and then reacting based on those assessments. It sounds very basic, but I find that it leaves me at a bit of a loss."

Here, she has encountered a further question about teaching. However, once she started the cognitive loop in her teaching, she started to move it from (e) awareness and discovery from reflection to (h) learning from practice, and to pursue the process of solving the problems. In comparison to the first interview, more categories about teaching emerged in the second interview,

and it shows that she has gradually gained multilateral viewpoints. The core category group of her teaching theory, which has a loop of (e) awareness and discovery from reflection, (f) challenging herself in teaching, (g) constructive change in teaching, and (h) learning from practice, indicates that she has gained more viewpoints toward her teaching. Reflecting on her practice, she conceptually understands her classroom. Once this loop starts to move, her professional development gradually spirals and grows in the classroom. It helps her to construct and reconstruct her teacher identity as an ALT.

4.3.1 Transformation of her understanding of Japanese

Here the focus is on another category: “Struggles with Japanese” in Figure 1 and “Agreement with Japanese language” in Figure 2. At first, three months after she started to teach in Japan, she narrated her uneasiness in data 109 in the first interview:

109 “Oh! Here's the thing. If you're explaining grammar and you're writing on the board, I can figure out what's going on. And the thing is I even know... I understand the grammar words. If you write the kanji, then I can figure it out. It's just when there is nothing written, if you're just talking, then I have no idea.”

In the class, all participants except her understand fluent Japanese, and therefore use some Japanese language in class especially during grammar explanation. As she had studied Japanese before she joined the JET Program, she already had some knowledge of Japanese. Therefore, the JTE thought that Ms. M understood almost all of the Japanese that they used in the classroom. However, the reality was different. After the first interview, the JTE confessed that she hadn't noticed that Ms. M was at a loss in the lessons at the beginning of their teaching in spring, and she felt sorry about that. It was too hard for Ms. M to understand the meta-language of grammar points, and she had “no idea” in the classroom at those times. It may have been that she felt she was marginalized there and felt left out in the classroom.

On the other hand, she talked about the efficacy of being able to use Japanese in data 52 as below.

52 “They know I can understand a little Japanese, so if they think it's really easy Japanese they can use, then they ask me.”

In fact, the analysis of the data clarifies, within the category of Japanese in Figure 1, that even though she felt left out, at the same time, she saw the efficacy of speaking Japanese in the classroom. It tells us that the two elements of feeling left out in the classroom ((j) in Figure 1) and effectiveness of speaking Japanese ((k) in Figure 1) are interwoven. Therefore, she went back and

forth between negative and positive feelings in their lessons. Moreover, the results tell us that she had a big struggle with English as in the following data 125 in the first interview.

125 “Yeah, like vocabulary and grammar. And I'm used to just speaking, you know? I'm not used to..., and sometimes even with Japanese people who are, like, adults, I can simplify my English a little bit, but I don't. It's not possible for me yet to make myself understood by the kids.”

In other parts of her interview, she narrated that students always relied on the JTE because she couldn't understand Japanese well, but at the same time, she noticed that students tried to talk to her by calling her name. Moreover, she reflected that students were challenging themselves to ask some questions of her in English. Though she experienced some struggles with the students' reliance on JTEs, she was also aware of students' attempts to use English to communicate with her. In addition to her struggles regarding Japanese in the classroom, she understood other elements which exist in the classroom, such as students' struggles with English and the necessity of supporting her students. By noticing these components, she started to experience a new struggle in assessment of students' learning. Her struggles are not just struggles but signs of her changing point of view toward students, herself, her teaching, and the need to learn Japanese. In the first interview, she reflected on many episodes in the classroom and what she felt in each situation. However, through reflecting on them, she started to discover her own value and identity in the language classroom.

87 “so this is a good chance to merge [in] something personal. Like this is why I'm here.”

88 “because I'm here I should be different from anyone else here.”

Her awareness led her self-reflection to an awareness of the value of her presence. In the first interview, at first she reflected on how experience changed her viewpoint toward lessons, her feelings about Japanese use, and her struggles in the classrooms. Those struggles led her to conceptualize herself as an ALT in Japan, think about the value of her presence, and to independently realize the meaning of being there as an ALT who is an English native speaker. By analysis of the second interview, a new category of challenging herself in Japanese learning ((p) in Figure 2) emerged in the diagram as below.

52 “There's also something really satisfying about climbing levels. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test helps me judge my overall Japanese level. I still evaluate myself based on feelings I get like ‘I think I can understand more conversational Japanese compared to one year ago,’ or, ‘my reading speed is faster than a few months ago.’ ”

As she became able to understand more about Japanese, she explained her new feelings.

- 11 “I’m now more familiar with grammar terms (in Japanese), so I can answer students’ questions and give hints to them in class using metalanguage. I feel like students ask me for help more than they did when I first started teaching. In the past, I always had to refer them to the JTEs.”

That is to say, although at first she had a feeling of being left out, after one year of teaching practice, that feeling had disappeared in the second interview. Instead of that, new components about Japanese had appeared: the advantage of using Japanese and challenging herself to learn Japanese. They are interwoven.

4.3.2 Growth of her membership in the community

To see her transformation from the students’ side, a lot of students noticed her efforts in learning Japanese. In the written questionnaire answered by students, they clearly articulated their feelings and impressions in the classroom. Student A reflected on the lessons: “At first, even though she talked to me, I couldn’t catch her English at all and I didn’t want to make errors in speaking, so we didn’t talk so much. But little by little, I became able to talk with her. When I feel some difficulties talking with her one-on-one, I go to her with my friends. She understands almost all of the meaning of my Japanese when I feel it difficult to tell her in English and explain some matters in Japanese. It is delightful.” She certainly has gained students’ trust in her teaching attitude. Moreover, other attitudes also emerged. She began to carefully understand each of the students and stand by them with supportive eyes. Therefore, the relationship between students and her gradually developed, and she started to gain membership to the classroom community through a certain trust between them. Students also noticed her warm support in and outside the classroom. Student C described: “After school before the Speech Festival, she stayed after 5:00 p.m. to support my practice for the Speech Festival. I really appreciated it. It was because of her kindness to us.” The trust between students and her influenced their learning attitude in lessons. She started to find students’ change in the classroom and feel delight as a teacher as shown in data 13.

- 13 “I’m really happy that students feel they can ask me some questions. I think that once I became familiar with Japanese grammar terms like *meishi*, *keiyoushi*, etc. I could start to use them a little bit to guide students.”

Building the relationships among participants in the classroom community, she started to understand students’ attitudes toward her, and the flow increased her delight as a teacher, and her membership there grew even stronger. This attitude supported the transformation of her identity in the classroom. She kept a positive and aggressive attitude throughout her teaching. She has an aspect

of trying to solve various problems or resolve struggles by herself, and that aspect drove her to strive in her development as a teacher. The loop of her own theory of teaching, which is in the center of the diagram of Figure 2, illustrates her scientific development in her teaching practice. In this cycle, the main reasons that she gained membership in the classroom community are her efforts to learn Japanese, her emerging understanding of individual students, and her standing by each student. They allowed her to build the relationships with members of the classroom and grow her membership in the community.

4.4 Investment in teaching as an ALT

In this section, the focus is on her construction of identity as an ALT. In the second interview, a new category has appeared, which is “the meaning and role of an ALT/a native speaker” in data 26. She narrated that she wanted to provide students with a good model for spoken English. In this interview, her concept of the meaning of being in the classroom and her role as an ALT had changed. In the first interview, she said that her role seemed to be to exchange cultures, and she talked a lot about “struggles about English” even though she is a native speaker, but she didn’t mention the meaning of being in the classroom as an ALT. However, in the second interview, she talked about being a model of a native speaker. Her own concept of being an ALT had become more definite and specific.

Norton (2000) suggested the concept of investment in the second language acquisition. When non-native speakers emigrate from their native countries for political or economic reasons, even though they experience hardship or difficulties living there, it is essential for the future of themselves and their family that they continue to learn their new language and culture. Norton termed it “investment.” In the field of motivation study, negative experiences in language learning reduce learners’ motivation. However, Norton distinguished it from investment. She analyzed these SLA learners’ learning approaches from the viewpoint of the relationship between learners and social and cultural aspects in their background, not from the viewpoint of psychological constructive concepts. Working through Ms. M’s struggles as a native English speaker in the Japanese classroom, as her investments, she tried the Japanese Language Proficiency Test in her challenge of learning Japanese, started to learn more about language teaching in graduate school, concentrated her efforts to build relationships with individual students in the classroom, and worked outside the classroom to make original teaching materials. Moreover she spent her time off after school in order to support the students participating in speech events. At the same time, she developed as a non-native Japanese speaker living in a new cultural community in Japan. The participants, not only students but also teachers including teachers of different subjects, grew to understand her efforts and the value of her investments throughout her teaching life, and under her investments, she gradually created relationships among community participants, traced the process of meaning-making in the new environment as an ALT, repositioned herself there, and reconstructed her new identity. She has progressively gained membership in the classroom and the new community. Even though her

identity as an ALT in the class was not being shaped and developed clearly in the diagram of the first interview, the analysis of the second interview clarifies that she underwent a process of her identity transformation in the classroom as an ALT.

5. Summary

In this study, through the analysis of two interviews between an ALT and a JTE, it was illustrated that investment by ALT Ms. M in her language teaching life led to her identity transformation in the classroom. Language teaching and learning occur in the classroom community. It is a social and cultural space in which the participants construct and reconstruct their relationships. Norton (2000) defines identity as concerned with social relationship across time, space, and possibilities for the future. The analysis of her two interviews also reveals that the relationship between the ALT and the JTE also had a powerful influence on Ms. M's process of identity reconstruction in the classroom. For a further study, it is also important to discover how to create supportive and cooperative relationships in teachers' development.

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Content footnotes

¹In 2001, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and Science and Technology Agency merged to become the present MEXT.