"M-san Again?": Identity-in-Practice of a Japanese Graduate Teaching Assistant

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Abstract

This study investigated how Rika, a Japanese graduate teaching assistant (GTA), presents her professional identity when she reports and discusses problems in an online Japanese language class with the lead instructor. By closely examining two stories told during instructors' weekly meetings through positioning analysis, findings indicated that the GTA positions herself as a problem reporter rather than a problem solver, thus a less professional Japanese language educator. Additionally, the GTA's representations of students' behavior in the Japanese online class also reflect her perceptions and teaching beliefs towards Japanese language teaching. Finally, this article concludes with the implications for language teacher education regarding GTA training and online language teaching.

Introduction

The topic of language teacher identity has been extensively

researched in recent years in the field of second/foreign

language teaching (Barkhuizen, 2016). Language teachers'

perceptions and beliefs strongly influence their classroom

practices (e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997) and their interactions

with colleagues (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2015). In U.S. universities,

especially public institutions, graduate students often have the

opportunity to engage in teaching roles within the classroom

(Park, 2004). GTAs play a vital role in supporting the teaching

and learning process in university settings, for the reason that

they are one of the main groups that teach at four-year higher

education institutions (Morreale et al., 2016, p.344).

Previous literature has examined participants at

varying stages of their careers, from pre-service teachers

(Barkhuizen, 2010; Trent, 2010) to in-service teachers

(Ahmadi, Samad & Noordin, 2013, Fogle & Moser, 2017) and

from novice teachers (Liu & Xu, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013)

to experienced teachers (Farrell, 2011; Ortaçtepe 2015).

However, GTAs may belong to multiple groups. GTAs could be students (pre-service) who teach in the language classes (in-service), or they could also be either novice teachers or experienced teachers who returned to school after working as language teachers for many years. In addition to their roles as language teachers, GTAs need to balance being graduate students and teachers (Park, 2004; Williams, 2007). These complexities make the professional identities of GTAs an interesting research topic.

Since English is the lingua franca, studies about language teacher identity mainly focused on GTAs in English programs. In contrast, the professional identities of GTAs in Japanese language programs have been under-researched. Some scholars have examined and triangulated data through various aspects, such as portfolio (e.g., Antonek, 1997), self-reflections (e.g., Lim, 2011), and semi-structured interviews (Thompson & Fioramonte, 2012). Previous research on language teacher identities of GTAs heavily relies on their in-class practices (e.g., Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

However, how GTAs' language teacher identities are reflected when interacting with peers and colleagues is scarce in the scholarly literature. Thus, this study aims to investigate a Japanese language GTA's professional identity reflected in her interaction with the lead teacher during their regular meetings.

The Japanese language program in this study adopts team-teaching, which allows several instructors (one lead instructor and GTAs) to teach the same course on different days. Therefore, the lead instructors and GTA(s) have regular meetings to ensure all teachers are on the same page. During the meetings, teachers usually discuss what happened (questions, problems, challenges, confusion, etc.) in the previous week and prepare for teaching (teaching contents, class activities, etc.) the following week. As a result, teachers share in conversations a large number of stories. Since positioning theory aims to investigate the "rights, duties, and obligations distributed among interlocutors or characters (...) in and through conversations or narratives" (Kayi-Aydar,

2019, p. 1), this study will utilize positioning analysis to analyze these narrative texts.

Positioning Analysis and Identity
Davies & Harré (1990) are generally considered to be pioneers in positioning analysis. The idea that the concept of "positioning", as opposed to the notion of "role", can be employed to facilitate the thinking of linguistically oriented social analysis. In particular, they believe that this concept of "positioning" helps focus attention on dynamic aspects of encounters in contrast to the use of "role," which highlights static, formal, and ritualistic aspects. Additionally, the authors emphasize that discursive positioning is a central social constructionist process "whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (p. 48).

Although positioning analysis was originally raised for discourse studies, a large number of scholars introduced this approach to narrative research (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Burdelski, 2013; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Gradually,

positioning analysis established its essential role in identity research through narrative/storytelling. Developed from Davies & Harré (1990), Bamberg (1997) then conducted a study that considered the process of positioning from three different levels. The first level is the story level, which relates to how the characters within the story world are constructed. At the second level, the interactional level, the storytellers use the linguistic means that are characteristic of the particular discourse mode. At the third level, also called "master narrative," Bamberg (1997) focuses on how language is employed to make claims by the narrator, and how these claims are relevant above and beyond the local conversation. In this study, I analyze participants' stories from these three levels to investigate how the GTA situates herself when interacting with the lead instructor and how her perceptions and teaching beliefs are reflected through her storytelling. In addition, Georgakopoulou (2007) demonstrates a particular perspective on how young Greek girls position themselves during the storytelling of men who are not there with them.

In her book chapter, she points out that representations of "others" are actually "constructions of social and moral orders and realities" (p.120). In other words, when telling stories of others or third (absent) parties, the storytellers are still constantly constructing their identities through positioning themselves. In this study, during regular meetings, GTAs can report what happened in their classes, what difficulties they encountered, how students behaved in the previous week, and discuss future lesson plans for the following week. When teachers talk about students' behavior, they construct and reflect their professional identities regarding teaching beliefs and their expectations of a "good" student or a "good" language classroom through an absent third party -- students.

The exploration of Japanese GTAs' professional identity is inadequate, and the examination through their interactions with peers and colleagues is scarce in the literature. Therefore, this study employs positioning analysis in storytelling to investigate a Japanese GTA's language

teacher identity through her talk-in-interaction during weekly

meetings. My study addresses the following research question:

How does the GTA project her professional identity when

reporting and discussing problems in the Japanese class with

her lead instructor? Since positioning analysis is a tool for

exploring how interlocutors position themselves or others in

the conversation (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004) where "they

(co)construct and (re)shape their identities" (Kayi-Aydar,

2019, p.17), this study mainly examines how participants

construct their identities in an interactional level of the local

conversation, instead of tackling broader social contexts such

as hierarchy or power relationship.

Methodology
There were two participants, Rika and Yuri, in this study.

When this study was conducted, Rika and Yuri were taking

turns to teach the same class on different days. The focal

participant, Rika (GTA), was a female Japanese native

language teacher in her thirties. She was an M.A. student

majoring in Japanese linguistics near graduation at the time of

the data collection. Rika had four-year experience in Japanese language teaching. During the time of data collection, Rika was teaching an intermediate-level Japanese course. The other participant was the lead instructor, Yuri, who designed the course. The lead instructor was also a female native Japanese speaker in her thirties. She obtained her master's degree from the same program in 2016 and worked as a full-time instructor after graduation. She had taught Japanese for six years by the time of data collection.

Table 1. Information of Participants

Name	Position	Age	Teaching Experience	Language	Time joined
Rika	Full-time	30s	5.5 years	Japanese, English	2015
Yuri	GTA	30s	6 years	Japanese, English	2015

I collected data by recording three online Zoom meetings that involved the GTA and the lead instructor of an

intermediate-level Japanese class in the spring semester of 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all Japanese language classes and instructors' meetings were migrated online during my data collection. I participated in their meetings silently, turning off my camera and keeping muted throughout. The data consist of 190 minutes in total. After obtaining all meeting recordings, I transcribed their meeting through the convention of conversation analysis (see Jefferson, 2004). I first determined stories according to Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), then I analyzed the narrative through positioning analysis.

Findings

Eleven cases of narratives about problem reporting and solution proposing are observed in the 190-minute conversational data. The overall distribution of these narratives is presented in Table 2. One can clearly find that Rika, the GTA, provided zero solutions to those problems reported during the meetings.

Table 2. The distribution of problem and solution during weekly
meetings

Participant	Problem reported	Solution proposed
Rika	72.7% (*n=8*)	0% (*n=0*)
Yuri	27.3% (*n=3*)	100% (*n=11*)
Total	100% (*n=11*)	100% (*n=11*)

Among the eleven narratives, I examine two most representative cases of the GTA's storytelling in their weekly meetings. In these two cases, Rika and Yuri shared similar stories, but played different roles in the storytelling – Yuri acting as the story recipient in the excerpt 1, and Rika took the role of story recipient in excerpt 2. By comparing their responses to the story, their identities at "interactional level" (Bamberg, 1997, 2004) are clearly presented. In all excerpts, R is Rika, the GTA, and Y is Yuri, the lead instructor.

In excerpt 1, the GTA reported a problem about students' chatting in her class. She first started with the

background information of the story. When students were

reading an article about Japanese matchmaking marriage, she

asked F-san, one of the students, how things in his home

country were, but F-san did not respond in time because of

some technical issues. Then the GTA continued the story

when she thought the problem began.

Excerpt 1

First Meeting (46:10-46:48 Zoom chatting problem in Rika's

class)

       1 R   tte (.) ato de ((raising eyebrows)) jugyoo owatte

kara

Then, later after the class is over

2 koo ((pointing to the screen)) chatto mitte tara

like this, when I looked at the chat

3 →   soko de **M-san** ga nanka (.) eego de

There, in English, M-san was like

4 F-san wa ima(.) omiai aite o sagashi ni itterun da

"F-san is now looking for a matchmaking person"

5 mitai na kanji chatto ni nyuuryoku shitete

(He) typed in the chat like that,

6 Y   hontoo desu ka (0.4)

Really?

7 R   ((nodding)) de:: (.) hoka no hito ga nanka (.)

        Then, other people like,

8 hahaha mitai na kanji datta kana

        (they) were like "hahaha"

9 de (.) F-san wa tententen ((fingers pointing 3 times))

        Then, F-san like, "dot dot dot"

10 nyuuryoku shitetan desu kedo

(he) typed, though.

11 Y   sore wa anoo (.)

        That was, um,

12 jyugyoo chuu ni

        during the class

13 tte koto [desu yone

     things like that, right?

14 R [jyugyoo chuu desu jyugyoo chuu desu

        During the class.

15 Y   (1.0) Sore wa dame desu (.)

That is bad.

16 R   soo desu ne(.)

          That is the case.

17 Tabun((frowning))

          Maybe,

18 →   daitai **M-san** ga ne:: ((raising eyebrows, nodding))

          mostly, it is M-san, you know,

19 nanka((frowning)) ironna koto o

          like, various things,

20 utteru n desu yo (.) sugoku=

(he) is typing a lot.

The GTA took the floor from line 01 to 05 to narrate

the highlight of this "chatting" problem. In lines 07-10, she

told the result of the story that F responded "…" after being

teased by M, another student in the class (line 9-10). After the

GTA finished the story, the lead instructor asked for

clarification on whether this chatting activity happened during

class (lines 11-13). In line 14, the GTA confirmed by

repeating – "During the class. During the class (*jyugyoo chuu desu jyugyoo chuu desu*)". In line 15, the lead instructor paused, then gave her evaluation or attitude towards this behavior, "That is bad (*sore wa dame desu*)." Then, the GTA connected this specific problem with M-san's general behavior in the classroom (lines 16-20). The GTA also reflected on her evaluation of this M-san's behavior through both non-verbal (frowning in lines 17 and 11) and verbal expressions such as intensifiers, including "mostly (*daitai*)" (line 18) and "a lot (*sugoku*)" (line 20). After hearing this story, the lead instructor suggested a solution and told the GTA to change the Zoom chat settings in her next class so that students could no longer send messages to each other.

Interestingly, two weeks after discussing the problem, a similar disruptive issue happened in the lead instructor's class. Therefore, the lead instructor shared a similar story. The class was targeting the delivery service in Japan. After introducing that Japanese express delivery could send a wide range of items, the lead instructor asked how the delivery

service is in the United States. M-san started typing in English

in the Zoom chat box again. Different from excerpt 1, the

lead instructor became the main storyteller while the GTA

became a story recipient.

Excerpt 2

2ⁿᵈ Meeting (51:40-53:20 Zoom chatting problem in the lead

instructor's class)

      1 Y   te sono ato ni (.)

           Then after that,

      2 amerika de wa doodesu ka tte kiitan desu ne=

           I asked how things are in America, you know

      3 R   =u:n ((nodding))=

Um-hum

      4 Y →   =soo shitara, **M-san** [ga

When I did that, M-san was

      5 R →   [@mata@ **M-san↑**=

                  M-san again?

      6 Y =((nodding)) soo (.) @de sorede@ (1.0)

That's it. Then after that

7 → **M-san** ga ((frowning)) eego de (0.3)

M-san typed in English that

8 amazon de wa nan demo okureru kedo ne ↑ LOL

[mitaina @haha@ (you) can send anything by Amazon

though, can't you?   Like LOL, haha

9 R   [a::haha

        Ah… haha

10 Y   soo yatte de (.) @sonde, C-san@ ga (0.5)

When I did that, then later, C-san was

11 no she's asking what you can [send (.) ka nanka

like, "no, she's asking what you can send"

12   R   [un   u:n

        Um-hum

13 Y   sooiu eego de yaritori o shiteite [de sore watashi ga

(They) interact in English in that way, then I

14   R   [u:n

Uhm

15 Y   tamatama, mi-mirete [ta node

 sometimes could see that, so

16 R [u:n ((nodding))

   Uhm

17 Y   yame tekudasai [tte itte

I said "please stop doing that"

18 R[u:n ((nodding))

   Uhm

19 (2.0)

20 Y   →   **M-san** desu ne=

It's M-san, right?

21 R=soo: ((nodding)) desu ne (.)

   That's the case.

22 →   **M-san** [desu ne

It's M-san, right?

23 Y [ne: shuhan [wa

   Isn't it? The principal offender

24 R [soo:((nodding)) desu ne (.)

   That's the case, isn't it?

25 →   watashi no toki mo **M-san**   [deshita

It was also M-san at my time

26 Y   [tte   fufufufu

       Then, hehehe

27 dakara moo hontoo(.)

       So, really,

28 sensee ni shika(.) chatto o okurenai yoo ni sureba=

       if you set as (students) can't send chat to

       anyone except for the teacher

29 R   =u:n

Uhm

30 Y   oshaberi o shinai((nodding)) node (.)

So they don't chat

31 R   wakarimashita

I understood

      In excerpt 2, Yuri, told a story from line 1 to line 17,

while the GTA was mainly providing alignments such as

"un/u:n" (lines 3, 12, 14, 16 and 18) and simple reaction

such as "a:: haha" (line 9). Only one exception appeared in

line 5 — "M-san again? (*mata M-san*)," where Rika provided her follow-up question.

After the instructor finished her story, there was a long pause for two seconds in line 19. Then, the lead instructor uttered: "It's M-san, right? (*M-san desu ne*)" in line 20. Rika confirmed by non-verbal behavior (nodding) in line 21 and by verbally repeating, "It's M-san, right? (*M-san desu ne*)" in line 22. Then in line 23, Yuri raised her comment: "Isn't it? The principal offender (*ne: shuhan wa*). Rika overlapped and expressed her agreement "That's the case. It was also M-san at my time" (line 24-25). After that, the lead instructor concluded the conversation by repeating the same solution she suggested the previous week (line 26-28, line 30). The GTA followed the advice by saying, "I understood (*wakarimashita*)" in line 31.

Rika (the GTA) positions herself as less professional
Participants in institutional interaction have particular goal orientations that are tightly related to their "institutional-relevant identities" (Heritage, 2004, p. 106).

Usually, weekly meetings offer chances for GTAs to report what happened or the difficulties they encountered in their classrooms to discuss how to solve those problems or avoid these situations in the future. In excerpt 1, the GTA is a storyteller, while the lead instructor is a story recipient. The GTA finished her storytelling about what happened in the class in line 8. However, the conversion did not end here, because the goal of this meeting – to solve problems – was not achieved yet. Thus, Yuri asked for supplementary information, gave her comment on the student's behavior and provided a suggestion/solution. In excerpt 1, the story told by the GTA is also a problem that she encountered in her class, so she reported this problem to seek help from the lead instructor. From this perspective and analysis of the second level — interactional level raised by Bamberg (1997), the GTA's situated identity became a "problem reporter," and the lead instructor became a "problem solver."

However, in excerpt 2, the lead instructor mainly told the story, so the GTA became a story recipient. Unlike

excerpt 1, where the lead instructor suggested a solution immediately after the GTA's storytelling, a two-second pause occurred after the story finished (line 18) in excerpt 3. It revealed that the GTA did not position herself as a problem resolver even though she was not the one who encountered the problem. Therefore, the lead instructor finished the storytelling by repeating the solution she raised in the previous meeting, and GTA followed this suggestion instead of proposing her own opinions.

At the end of the conversation, when Yuri told Rika to change the Zoom setting to avoid chatting problems in the future, the GTA uttered, "I understood (*wakarimashita*)". In Japanese, when someone is asked to do something, *wakarimashita* is generally used to express understanding and to promise compliance (Takagi, 2006). In excerpt 2, by uttering "I understood (*wakarimashita*)", Rika (the GTA) showed her understanding of the lead instructor's solution and her promise of following Yuri's decision. Therefore, in

the narrative of excerpt 2, the GTA positioned herself as a decision follower.

In this section, I examined different responses to the story between the GTA and the lead instructor. In excerpt 1 and 2, instead of positively proposing solutions, Rika acted passively waiting for suggestions from the lead instructor. Therefore, one can see that Rika (the GTA) positioned herself as a problem reporter and decision follower, thus a less professional language educator through the storytelling.

Teaching beliefs construction by talking about "others"
When interlocutors talk about or comment on others, they are actually "constructions of social and moral orders and realities" (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.120). That is to say, how the participants represent stories related to the absent third party reflects their own cognitions and perceptions. Therefore, in this case, under the institutional meeting setting, teachers talking about students' behavior reflects their own teaching beliefs and expectations of a "good" language classroom.

In excerpt 1, after the lead instructor provided her own judgment — "That is bad (*sore wa dame desu*)" in line 12, the GTA strongly agreed with the lead instructor's comment because she frowned twice in lines 13 and 14 to show that she did not think M's behavior was appropriate either. She also indicated that M's behavior has lasted for a while and that she has been bothered by it because she not only frowned but also added intensifiers to emphasize the frequency (*daitai*, mostly) and the degree (*sugoku*, an adverb to show a strong degree). Through both verbal and non-verbal behavior, the GTA illustrated her expectations for students not to chat about things unrelated to the class.

In addition, the absent main character of these stories — "M-san (bolded and underlined)," was uttered seven times in Excerpt 1 (lines 3 and 18) and Excerpt 2 (lines 2, 5, 7, 20, 22, 25). In Excerpt 1, "M-san" was first introduced by Rika as one of the main characters in her story. At this time, she talked about "M-san" neutrally. However, after finishing the story, Rika provided some supplementary information in line

18: "Maybe, mostly, it is M-san, like, typing various things, a lot" with frowning. As a non-verbal movement, frowning is a cue that shows strong disagreement (Kaukomaa et al., 2014; Seiter, 1999, 2001). In this conversation, the GTA frowned to reveal her evaluation of M-san's behavior — she considered it problematic.

As mentioned before, when the lead instructor told a story, the GTA only provided simple responses to either show her alignment or encourage the lead instructor to continue, except for line 5 in Excerpt 2. When the lead instructor mentioned that one of the main characters is "M-san" in line 4, Rika immediately commented by overlapping with the lead instructor and repeating "mata M-san" in line 5. The repeated story character "M-san" could be regarded as a "reference" (Georgakopoulou, 2007). By investigating how three Greek adolescent female friends talking about absent parties in their stories, Georgakopoulou (2007) found these girls repeated brief phrases ("references") in their shared stories to refer to their shared stories or

narrative characters, and the references consisted of the punch line of a narrative and/or a quick characterization of a third party. Similarly, in this study, by repeating "M-san" with increased voice, Rika characterized M-san as a troublemaker in the following narratives, which also emphasized her disagreement with M-san's behavior.

Later in line 20, after finishing her story, Yuri uttered, "It's M-san, right? (*M-san desu ne*)". The final particle *ne* in Japanese functioned as an "attention-getting device" (Cook, 1992, p. 522), which indicates "the speaker's attitude of inviting the involvement of the other party" (Lee, 2007, p.367) by emphasizing shared emotions and feelings (Cook, 1992). The particle *ne* also "marks alignment as a relevant concern explicitly" (Morita, 2005, p. 107) between Rika and Yuri. As a response, Rika aligned both verbally (*soo desu ne*) and non-verbally (nodding). Then, the GTA immediately repeated the same sentence, "It's M-san, right? (*M-san desu ne*)". In addition to the analysis of repeated "reference" by Georgakopoulou (2007), Rika repeated the exact same

sentence here, which is an other-repetition. The speaker repeated to claim that she understood the previous speaker's meaning and reflected her emotional stance (Svennevig, 2004). In this segment, Rika utilized repetition to display her disapproval with M-san's behavior again. Moreover, she confirmed the supplementary information by emphasizing again that M-san also did the same thing during her class.

From the examination above, one can see that Rika demonstrated her perception of a good language class is that students need to be focused in the class instead of distracting others. When the chatting box in Zoom became a function that could make students less focused on the content of the class, Rika agreed with Yuri to forbid this function from students. Additionally, the student who offers distracting topics is not preferred either.

Discussion and Conclusion
In this study, I discussed two similar stories told by two different Japanese language instructors — one by Rika, the GTA, and the other by Yuri, the lead instructor. Through

close examination of the two stories based on Bamberg (1997) and Georgakopoulou (2007), the findings indicate that during weekly online meetings, the GTA positions herself as a less professional Japanese language educator who holds a situated identity as a problem reporter in the storytelling. In addition, the GTA's representations of students' behavior reflect her perceptions and teaching beliefs regarding Japanese language teaching.

This research also has implications for language teacher education. First, it would be essential to explore how to encourage GTAs to exercise their agency in class planning instead of only following others' suggestions. Second, with the growing trend of online language teaching, especially when the pandemic has been continuously affecting the teaching mode, how to treat and use some additional functions of online platforms would also be a necessary and unavoidable topic to investigate.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions

.	Falling sentence-final intonation.
:::	Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound. The more colons the greater the extent of stretching.
@--@	Utterance between the @ @ is said in a laughing voice.
ha ha ha	Laughter.
(0.5)	Length of pause/silence in seconds, (0.5) indicates a pause of 5-tenths of a second, relative to the speed of the preceding utterance.
(.)	Micro-pause.
↑	Rising intonation.

[	A left-hand bracket marks where an utterance starts to overlap with the following utterance.
=	Latched utterances
(( ))	Non-verbal behavior.