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# Revisiting Challenges by Reflecting on Language Learning and Language Teaching Experiences

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This article discusses teacher cognition in an intercultural context, taking a constructivist approach to narrative. A Japanese and a Hungarian language teacher reflected on their classroom practices in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The present study addresses the challenges language teachers face and how these contribute to their professional lives and success. Content analysis revealed that the main challenges were language barriers, time constraints, and intercultural differences. These challenges gave both teachers feelings of success: the English teacher could encourage Japanese students to speak and the Japanese teacher used different visuals to overcome difficulties.

## BACKGROUND

Schank and Abelson's (1995) schema theory claims that we live our lives based on our previous experiences, which are stored in our memories in the form of stories. Our memories contain numerous stories, which we remember because somebody told them to us or because we experienced them. These stories in our minds determine the ways people interpret the world (p. 3). Teacher cognition is also based on those stories, which emerged from teachers' prior experiences. Previous studies elaborated on teacher cognition, which is embedded in teachers' actual practices. The ways teachers think and believe have an impact on their teaching instruction (Borg, 2003, p. 81). Therefore, it is important to conduct research about how teachers perceive their past experiences and potential challenges, because those decisions determine their practices. Also, it was suggested by Luggossy (2009) that it would be useful to have more teachers interpret their own beliefs and practices.

The aim of this research is to shed light on two teachers' reflections about their prior learning experiences and teaching activities in intercultural contexts. This qualitative case study is grounded in the social constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1997) to narrative. This theory suggests that narratives are constructed in the ways in which experiences are retold; this involves not only the ways they actually happened but also the ways they are reflected upon (Bruner, 1987, p. 1). In other words, teachers' narratives are relevant because their critical reflection helps to explore in depth teacher cognition and the relationship between cognition and practices. Stories make narratives more powerful and persuasive because they can illustrate beliefs in the form of examples, according to Schank and Abelson (1995, p. 7). Stories are valuable because they have many indexes: for example attitudes, beliefs and decisions. When we tell stories we tend to relate them to experiences, which already exist in our minds. The more indexes we have connected to our stories, the more parallels we can draw between them, which contributes to our learning (Schank & Abelson, 1995, p. 7). The current research paper will show how teachers' "story-based knowledge" (p. 41) conveys personal life perspectives.

The contexts in which stories are embedded are very important to consider, because they strongly influence teachers' understandings. The present, in which a story unfolds, is the point where past and future are perceived; therefore, it is important to consider the present situation which surrounds the participants. The context of a re-telling may have changed over time because the original event was situated in the past. For example, political changes may influence the understandings of narratives (Horsdal, 2012, pp. 84-85).

Moreover, cultural differences also need to be taken into consideration when interpreting stories. In the case of the present study, differences between Hungarian and Japanese cultures are significant. Narratives are used "to capture the nature and meaning of experiences that are difficult to observe directly and are best understood from the perspective of those who experience them" (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown, 2013). Therefore, this study relies on teachers' narrative accounts of their experiences to focus on the meaning of these experiences for the teachers themselves in intercultural contexts and to see how the perception of these cultural differences impacts their interpretation of their experiences.

Beliefs are context dependent; therefore, intercultural contexts may also shape the ways people think about their experiences. Cultural differences impact teachers' beliefs and determine their teaching practices. Bruner (1986) suggested in his dual landscape theory that narratives include both the "landscape of action" and "landscape of consciousness" (pp. 11-12). Teachers' story-based knowledge, which is constructed from prior experiences, displays both landscapes: action refers to teaching, and consciousness refers to beliefs (Lugossy, 2009, p. 60). Teacher beliefs depict the complexity of teachers' mental lives: their own philosophies and assumptions about teaching underlying their teaching practices. In the past, beliefs were perceived as static; however, now they are conceptualized as dynamic variables (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Amuzie & Winke, 2009). Based on various contexts, beliefs are complex, multi-faceted, and changing over time. According to Amuzie and Winke (2009), beliefs determine the success of learning and teaching, and also have an impact on attitudes (pp. 373-374).

Attitudes need to be explored, because these may have significant impact on teachers' instructional practices and classroom behavior. Baker (1992, p. 10) suggested that "attitude is a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior". Attitude is individually rooted in shared behavior but may change due to personal experiences. As for language attitudes, one can distinguish two approaches: the behaviorist and the mentalist approach (Fasold, 1984, pp. 147-148). According to the behaviorist approach, attitudes are forms of reactions people have to social situations, whereas the mentalist approach perceives attitudes as a mental state, which may develop particular behavior patterns (Fasold, 1984, pp. 147-148).

Previous studies (Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1994; Numrich, 1996) have shown the connection between teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practices, which entailed both consistencies and inconsistencies. Lugossy (2009) has found that beliefs may change if reflected upon over time; therefore, it would be necessary to have more teachers recount and interpret their past experiences and teaching practices as well as reflect on them critically (p. 68). Similarly, the present narrative research examines teachers' reflections on their language learning and teaching beliefs and practices, but it is unique in a sense that language learning and language teaching practices are examined in an intercultural context in which both participants were placed to see how the new context impacted their interpretation of their own practices. Also, teacher cognition plays a very determining role in teachers' careers and it embraces "the complexity of teachers' mental lives" (Borg,

2003, p. 86). Research about teacher cognition is concerned with prior learning experience, teacher education, and classroom practice (Borg, 2003). The focus of this paper is the first and last research theme: prior learning experiences and classroom practices.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The first context of this research was the University of Pécs in Hungary, where the Japanese language courses were taught. In the 1990s, in its Geography Department, various Asian languages were available, including Japanese language instruction. Japanese was an elective course, taught by a native speaker for university students. Meanwhile, Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka and Pécs University in Hungary granted opportunities for Japanese graduate students, majoring in Japanese language education, to teach in Hungary for one or two semesters in order to fulfill their teaching practice.

The second context was a pre-medical college in Hungary where international students were preparing for a Hungarian medical university entrance. This pre-medical stage is a possible choice for every international student who wishes to attend a medical university in Hungary. The intensive course takes three months to complete, while the normal course lasts six months. The language of instruction was English, and students could study subjects such as Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Medical English, and English Communication. These subjects prepared them for the entrance exam for medical university. This pre-medical program was a very important stage in their studies, because it provides the basic knowledge on which students could build further. Since 2006, a significant rise has been identified in Japanese student mobility to Hungary, especially at Hungarian medical universities (Glantz, 2014). The number of Japanese students going to Hungary has grown; in 2019, 500 Japanese were enrolled in tertiary education in both degree-seeking and credit-seeking English medium programs (Oktatási Hivatal, 2019). The Hungarian teacher participant of this study taught Japanese medical students in Hungary.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What were the intercultural challenges in two language teachers' lives and teaching experiences?
2. How did these challenges contribute to their professional life and success?
3. How did their prior learning experiences influence their classroom practices?

## **PARTICIPANTS**

In this case study one of the participants was Japanese and the other was Hungarian. The first individual had previously taught the Japanese language to Hungarian students in Hungary. Her students belonged to various age groups, from elementary school up to university. She was teaching in a different environment from her home country, Japan; therefore, in her case acculturation and managing cultural differences needed to be considered. The second participant was a Hungarian teacher of the English language. She had taught various age groups as well, and at present she is still teaching English courses to international students, including Japanese, at a pre-medical college in Hungary. In her case, cultural differences are very important to investigate because of the rich intercultural environment she is teaching in.

## DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURE

Two semi-structured interviews were carried out: one with the former teacher of Japanese in Hungary, and the other with the Hungarian teacher, who teaches at a pre-medical college in Hungary. The former interview was conducted in Japanese, transcribed, and translated to English, while the latter was conducted in English and transcribed. The length of both interviews was one hour and a half. The interview questions elaborated on the language teachers' experiences, teaching practices and their interpretations. As for the data analysis, Polkinghorne's (1995) "analysis of narratives" approach was utilized, according to which stories are used as data, and the analysis does not always include storytelling. This approach aims to identify repeated patterns by looking more closely at what narratives have in common and the differences among them in order to understand some factors that determine language learning and teaching practices. The analysis of narratives focused on the following main themes: managing cultural differences, relationships between prior learning experiences and teaching, challenges in the profession and their management, and success stories.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Intercultural Challenges in Language Teachers' Lives and Teaching Experiences

Based on the interview findings, challenges play a very dominant role in both the Japanese and the English language teacher's lives. Challenge stories can be divided into two types: challenges in life, and those in the teaching profession. In the first category, environment change, cultural issues, and language barriers were mentioned, because the Japanese participant moved to Hungary from Japan after marrying a Hungarian. "*Since I came here, I couldn't speak anything. Without language, there is no chance to adapt to the culture.*" Thus, adaptation and acculturation in Hungary posed a challenge for the Japanese teacher, who at first experienced culture shock. However, she could successfully overcome it, due to helpful Hungarian friends, and the political changes made her adaptation more comfortable. She claimed that she got used to the Hungarian language and culture over time; however, another statement revealed that, in fact, the language barrier did not disappear completely. It remained somewhat a challenge "*even now*", even though her adaptation proved to be complete.

In the Hungarian teacher's case, the main challenge concerned her teaching experiences in the multicultural classroom. Teaching English to Japanese students was the most challenging for the teacher, and it made her re-think former teaching practices to adjust to the multicultural classroom context and to encourage her students to speak English. As the interview excerpts below illustrate, teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students posed a challenge, and as a response to it, the teacher started to learn the Japanese language to be able to support and understand her students. Even though she was in Hungary, a non-Japanese speaking environment, which made it even more difficult to learn the language, she made a remarkable effort to be able to help her students as a response to the intercultural challenges in the classroom. Through learning Japanese, she could identify common problems her students had in terms of English language learning, as she related her teaching challenges to her Japanese language learning experiences.

*"One of the problem with Japanese students learning English or Hungarian or any European language is pronunciation... they mix when they are writing, they write Hungary with an L. And they have seen it one million times because they don't hear it you know it is reflected. Also "f", if it is in an initial*

*position, something like Fuji, it's not a labial sound, it's a wind sound in Japanese (hu). And there are other letters, which they don't pronounce, but I can't think of more. But there are more. And the length of words and the stress is, so all these are problems. Intonation is a problem. It's difficult to understand Japanese.” (interview excerpt, Hungarian teacher)*

*“My Japanese language school was a fantastic, good language school which has all the modern methods that you can think of, there are about four, five teachers very actively teaching and we have celebrations for all kinds of national holidays...” (interview excerpt, Hungarian teacher)*

### **Contribution of Challenges to Their Professional Lives and Success**

Answering the second research question, cultural differences such as the different value systems in Hungary and Japan posed a challenge at first, but later on the Japanese teacher could turn this to her advantage. *“I thought to myself: I can do this kind of life, and I got used to it real quick. I like it very much”*. Living in Hungary helped her to be more open-minded and shaped her way of thinking as she developed a new value system in accordance with Hungarian culture, as the following excerpt illustrates:

*When I was young, I want this and this and that, I had my own status. But since I came here I don't need any of these. I just want to be with my family. Sharing the happiness ... I just need ... a place where I can relax, that's enough. That's happiness. People show happy faces and I realized: ‘Why was I so worried about collecting things’? (interview excerpt, Japanese teacher)*

Living her life in Hungary contributed to her identity co-construction as she developed a new self which was distinct from her L1 self. This is in line with Norton's (2000) poststructuralist theory of identity in which meeting with new people enables new identities to be co-constructed with the already existing ones, and new attitudes may be formed. Her identity co-construction was indicated by her preference towards strong family values, being closely connected with members of the family, which was so foreign and unfamiliar for her in the beginning. Moreover, she successfully minimized language and communication problems, as she was very enthusiastic about making herself understood, and with gestures she implied when she needed some help. Her compensation strategies, along with the caring and supportive environment, gave her a feeling of success.

Language barriers were recurring themes because they appeared in teaching as a challenge in both cases. The Japanese teacher's limited proficiency in English and Hungarian posed a challenge in the Japanese language classroom. Even though she eventually managed to make herself understood in everyday life, she still struggled with the beginner Japanese class to explain certain grammatical features and concepts. On the other hand, as a solution, she utilized pictures and colors in her teaching to bridge the linguistic gap between herself and the students, which is an example of how a teacher acted consistently with her beliefs. For the English teacher, one challenge meant *“to get somebody to talk on an honest level ... because when you are not in control of the language then you don't say what you want to say. You say what you can say.”* In this sense, the problem of language barrier is approached from the side of students. The teacher tried to reduce that barrier by offering them topic choices.

The English teacher was a Hungarian citizen, teaching in Hungary, yet she was in an intercultural environment where students were coming from all over the world. Among the international students, she was mainly teaching Japanese students, which created a considerable cultural gap and language barrier, requiring re-examination. She acknowledged in the interview that she had *“lost all the confidence in being*

*successful about getting them to speak*”, which she considered as her biggest challenge. On the other hand, she perceived English communication as a therapy, and applied that successfully in the classroom. Her success story unfolded in how she dealt with an outburst of a Chinese student’s tragic story. At that time, she perceived English communication as treatment for sharing problems in a foreign language, in a supportive environment. This situation exposed her strong beliefs and the way they were present in her practice, similar to research findings in Numrich (1996) and Borg (2003). Also, English communication as a therapy was a way to reduce the gap and overcome the challenge, as she assisted her students to overcome their own problems in the English class. In order to succeed with English as a therapy, students need an adequate, comfortable classroom environment, which encourages them to speak. The English teacher’s small stories revealed the pattern of success in a way that she could encourage and maintain group collaboration and group cohesion. Various tasks designed for students, such as study abroad related materials concerning students’ own experiences, discussion of field trips, and intercultural topics inspired them as well as creating an anxiety-free classroom and a friendly environment. She demonstrated that in the form of a yearbook, which she made and gave to each student in her class: *“They were very active and loveable so it was worth making an effort like this.”*

### **Inconsistencies Between Beliefs and Practices**

Another challenge in connection with time limitations shows a clear pattern in both data sets. Both language teachers had to struggle with time constraints, which caused them frustration and regret. The Japanese language teacher had to face a time limitation about preparing a private student for the Japanese language proficiency test. The exam did not assess speaking; therefore, the teacher focused on developing grammar, reading, and writing skills. *“That girl can’t really speak. She didn’t have much time ... so speaking was secondary.”* Here, the theme of success, that the student passed her exam, was overshadowed by the teacher’s deep regret about teaching practices. Her beliefs were not in line with her practices; however, later on she became aware of that. Such inconsistencies can also be found in other studies by Lugossy (2009) and Numrich (1996). In the current study, the time limitation made it impossible for the Japanese teacher to act in accordance with her beliefs. Repetitions such as *“too bad”*, *“poor girl”* expressed her negative feeling towards that recollection. Time constraints and the change of the school’s system caused a major problem for the English teacher as well. With an increase in the number of exams and exam preparatory lessons, she mentioned that *“very little remains.”* The mixture of regret and frustration was present in a story when she talked about the limits of her previous freedom:

*“Could we go to the park in the last lesson? We usually do that and I had to say no. A week later you will have the entrance exam, in the last lesson I need an activity in the classroom ... and I was so unhappy to be saying this”.* (interview excerpt, Hungarian teacher)

The new situation she had to face was something she could not solve and made her feel helpless. *“So many things have been lost, it’s not just the yearbook”*. Further, the theme of intercultural differences posed a challenge for the English teacher, especially when teaching Japanese students. They did not receive such communicative-oriented education prior to departure, and in addition, they were coming from a country where deeply rooted cultural traditions encourage silence as a way of showing respect. Thus, the nature of this challenge was cultural. *“This was a difficult girl. She didn’t open her mouth for 90 minutes, this was 3*

*days before the entrance exam.*” The teacher tried to overcome the problem by asking questions directly; however, the situation did not change for the better. *“She took it as a personal attack from me that I was pressuring her to do something.”* As a result, she decided not to interfere anymore, which was against her belief; however, she used that as a strategy to avoid conflict in the classroom. On the other hand, she used peer support as a strategy to encourage speaking in class. Students had group discussions and peers were asked to interact with one another in English, which resulted in more confidence in speaking. Another cultural challenge was illustrated in the next excerpt: *“The game was called interruption ... I remember the first time I did it ... two people walked out on me with a headache. They had migraine after 10 minutes of this. It’s so upsetting.”* The yearbook, which the teacher designed by herself, was full of cognitively-engaging, communicative tasks and topics negotiated with the students, but overcoming a challenge is a very demanding issue, as she stated *“sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”*

### **Prior Learning Experiences’ Influence on Classroom Practices**

Success stories were related to both interviews. The Japanese teacher felt the most successful about her private students who could pass the Japanese language exam and could get scholarships to go to Japan. The English teacher had a similar feeling of success in connection with medical university admittance: *“These Japanese here had given me a feeling of success. The ones I pushed were happy that I pushed them ... and they all got admitted.”* Referring to the third research question, prior learning experiences had no direct relation with the Japanese teacher’s teaching practices. Although it is indirect, the Japanese teacher’s accounts revealing her past observations on education may have had an impact on her teaching beliefs and practices:

*“In the park there are many little children and when they cry ‘What happened to you?’ mothers ask it very often, right? They talk to them ... So this kind of education is a good one. It’s really wonderful ... but in Japan it’s different ... I don’t see a person who talks to a crying child in Japan like that ... ‘Shut up!’ it’s like that.”* (interview excerpt, Japanese teacher)

This excerpt may imply that she did not want to teach the way she had seen it done in the past – for instance, drawing a parallel with her beliefs on teaching only grammar, which she considered *“boring”*. *“I teach the way I feel and think.”* This indicates her beliefs that she relied on mostly herself, and did not have a determining role model. Negative prior observations might have shaped her teaching beliefs in a positive way. On the other hand, there were some consistencies between the English teacher’s French classroom experiences and her English teaching at present, which reflected Schank and Abelson’s (1995) study on how prior experiences impact present actions and how one learns from prior experiences. Role models from prior learning experiences may affect teaching beliefs and practices. In the interview, the English teacher reflected on her role model, her French teacher who played an important role in motivating her as a student and later on as a teacher. The English teacher learnt from her role model how *“to pass on motivation”*. In other words, she was motivated by her teacher’s assessment practices, and she could successfully transfer that motivation to her students, as she evaluated them based on their effort put into language learning. These narrative accounts revealed her own awareness of how her beliefs were shaped through the teachings of her role model, which confirms Bruner (1987), who suggested that retelling stories may help in realizing and shaping our own beliefs.



## CONCLUSION

The present case study discussed two language teachers' challenges in their lives and occupations. The findings have shown that the main challenges in the two language teachers' professional lives were language barriers, time constraints, and intercultural differences. In the Japanese teacher's case further challenges concerned acculturation and adaptation in Hungary, which she could successfully overcome due to the supportive environment and her communication strategies. Cultural differences were challenging for her; however, over time she could turn them to her advantage by accepting a new value system. These challenges gave both teachers feelings of success; the English teacher could encourage Japanese students to speak, which resulted in university admittance, and the Japanese teacher used different visuals to make the Japanese language easier for her students and to overcome the difficulty, which derived from limited language proficiency. In addition, prior learning experiences contributed to the teaching practices in the case of the English teacher, and the influence of the role model played a major role in her teaching as well.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview questions for language teachers

#### Questions for the teacher of English

##### I. Reflection on language learning experiences:

1. What languages can you speak?
2. How did you learn English?
3. What learning strategies did you use as a language learner?
4. What teaching methods did your teacher use?
5. I've heard that you started to learn Japanese as well. Why did you start learning it? How do you study Japanese? Do you study by yourself or do you have a teacher? Do you use Japanese language frequently? With whom?
6. Did you learn about Japanese culture as well? What did you learn about it? Did it influence your way of thinking? If yes, in what way?
7. Have you ever been to Japan?
8. What do you think about Japanese people, your students? In what way are they similar/different from Hungarian students or other international students?

##### II. Reflection on their teaching:

1. What do you teach? Who do you teach?
2. How long have you taught English?
3. What do you think is the most important in English language teaching? What is the most important thing to know for your students?
4. What strategies do you use to make English meaningful to your students?
5. How do you help your students to experience success?
6. What techniques do you use to develop their communication skills in English?
7. Did you integrate medicine related material in your teaching? Why or why not?
8. How do you deal with the diverse cultural background in your English class? Did you have any difficulties? How did you overcome them?
9. What is your experience in connection with Japanese students' English proficiency and WTC?
10. Can you recall an experience when your shy student spoke up confidently in English?
11. How do you explain this?

12. How do you perceive your students' progress in your class?
13. Can you tell a story about a successful class you taught?
14. Can you tell a story about a technique or activity in your class which didn't work the way you expected?
15. How did you solve that problem in the class?
16. Did you get feedback from your students about your English class? What were the reflections? In your opinion, how do your students perceive your classes? What makes you think that?

### **Questions for the former teacher of Japanese**

#### **I. Reflection on language learning experiences:**

1. What languages can you speak?
2. When and why did you move to Hungary from Japan?
3. How long have you lived in Hungary?
4. How often do you visit Japan?
5. Did you have problems with adjustment? If yes, can you recall an experience, when you had adjustment problems?
6. Can you give me a few examples of your experience of culture shock and cultural conflict?
7. How did you overcome these difficulties?
8. How did you learn Hungarian and English? What learning strategies did you apply? What teaching techniques did your teacher use?
9. What is your attitude towards speaking in Hungarian and in English? Did you have difficulties with speaking in Hungarian, English? What do you like about Hungarian language? What do you dislike about Hungarian language?

#### **II. Reflection on their teaching:**

1. What did you teach? Who did you teach?
2. How long have you taught Japanese?
3. What do you think is the most important in Japanese language teaching? What is the most important thing to know for your students?
4. What strategies do you use to make Japanese meaningful to your students?
5. How do you help your students to experience success?
6. What do you think are your qualities as a language teacher? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
7. What challenges did you have when teaching Japanese to Hungarian students?
8. How did you overcome these problems?
9. What is your experience in connection with Hungarian students' WTC in Japanese?
10. Can you recall an experience when your student spoke up confidently in Japanese?
11. How do you explain this?
12. How did you perceive your students progress in your class?
13. Can you tell a story about a successful class you taught?
14. Can you tell a story about a technique or activity in your class which didn't work the way you expected?
15. How did you solve that problem in the class?
16. Did you get feedback from your students about your Japanese class? What were the reflections? In your opinion, how do your students perceive your classes? What makes you think that?

## ABSTRACT

### **Revisiting Challenges by Reflecting on Language Learning and Language Teaching Experiences**

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This study discusses some challenges language teachers face, and how teacher cognition in intercultural contexts affects the learning outcome. A Japanese language teacher, teaching Japanese to Hungarian students, and a Hungarian language teacher, teaching English to Japanese students, reflected on their classroom practices in Hungary in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Narrative analysis revealed that the main challenges were language barriers, time constraints, and intercultural differences. Overcoming these challenges gave both teachers feelings of success: Japanese students were able to improve their speaking skills, whereas Hungarian students received scholarships to Japan due to enhanced Japanese language proficiencies.

## 要 約

### 言語学習と言語教育の経験を基にした課題の再確認

田 辺 ゆりあ

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本論では、言語教員の課題や、異文化コンテキストの中で教員の理解がどのような影響を与えるかの調査を行った。一人の日本語言語教員である日本人が、ハンガリー人に対しての日本語言語教育と、一人のハンガリー人英語教員の日本人学生に対しての英語教育を、インタビューを通じ検証した。この分析で、言語の壁や、時間の制約、文化の違いが主な課題として明らかにされた。又、これらの主要課題を克服することに伴い、日本人学生の会話力の上達や、ハンガリー人学生の奨学金の授与という成果が得られ、二人の教員に達成感を与えた。