

# Exploring Literature on Professionalism: Reflections from Language Teachers in Japanese Universities

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### **Introduction and Context**

In the past decade, many universities in Japan have set up language centers to consolidate students' practical language skills, encourage research on foreign language teaching, and raise students' cross-cultural awareness, all under the name of internationalization. These centers are generally independent of the regular academic departments and are an institute within the university.

All English language teachers in language centers, whether native English-speakers or Japanese natives, hold high academic credentials from prestigious universities outside Japan, mainly the U.S. and U.K. The gender ratio is almost equal and their ages are relatively young, from the mid-30s to the mid-40s. Many teachers are well experienced in classroom teaching for a variety of courses ranging from those meant for complete beginners with specific learning difficulties to advanced students. Regardless of their academic disciplines, the native English-speaking as well as Japanese teachers are assigned to teach the English language. They are expected to deliver lessons at the same level as EFL<sup>1</sup> teachers working for commercial language schools do. This framework differs from that used in regular academic departments, in which teachers basically teach only their academic disciplines.

Although few differences can be found between the academic backgrounds and research achievements of English teachers in language centers and the faculty members in academic departments, the English teachers are not only less valued and professionally recognized, but also regarded as replaceable. The most notable example is their lacking job security. They work in a full-time but fixed-term position, which renders them similar to temporary staff. While they are externally named "senior lecturer," this title has a different meaning here than it does in regular academic departments. Thus, they are excluded from university-related affairs. Even their office is physically marginal and located away from regular academic departments. The staff share their space with other

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<sup>1</sup> EFL is an acronym for English as a Foreign Language and is studied by people living in places where English is not the first language.

teachers, which is separated using partitions. Therefore, they have suffered a lack of recognition from departments or other campus organizations. This marginalization leads to a lack of appreciation for their work or rather a failure to value these teachers (Johnston, 2003). Thus, the objectives of this research are to discuss the different interpretations of professionalism, reflect upon existing literature and apply it to my professional context, and discuss my observations and add further reflections. My interest in exploring this area emanates from my own sense of status-less-ness and feeling of professional stagnation, a feeling shared by most of my colleagues.

## **Various Interpretations of Teacher Professionalism**

Teachers at universities in Japan, as elsewhere, are considered members of a prestigious occupation. However, it seems that English language teachers are undervalued inside and outside the university, compared to other academic disciplines. This is because many university teachers speak English along with possessing knowledge of their respective disciplines, and people outside the university tend to perceive the teaching of English as a “non-profession.” In addition, English has been a required subject since junior high school, and is not considered an intellectually challenging subject, unlike other specialized university subjects. Even though we admit that some English language teachers require professional training, in general, many perceive this profession as fundamentally different from those receiving the highest public recognition. “It is unrealistic to imagine that in most societies teachers of English (or indeed of any subject) could acquire the same status and rank as doctors and lawyers” (Johnston, 2003, p.106). Drastic reforms in English language education have been undertaken in Japan to improve their professionalism and define new concepts of professionalism in teaching, however, other reasons still denigrate teaching English, seeing it as different from traditional professions.

### **1. Teaching is a Craft Profession: Tacit knowledge and Reflection in Action**

The general public perceives teaching as a semi- or quasi-profession (Etzioni, 1969; quoted in Whitty, 2000, p.282) especially compared to the traditional professions, such as medical doctors or lawyers. Furthermore, as Welker (1992) pointed out, teaching is an occupation different from law and medicine, insofar as teachers hand their knowledge and skills over to their learners, unlike doctors and lawyers. Pratte and Rury (1991) defined teaching as “a craft profession, but on a conscience of craft, rather than a more conventional ideal of professionalism.” They argued that, whereas expert professionals

are required to have “conceptualized” or formal knowledge to perform their duties, teachers require only “embodied” or experiential knowledge to do so. Conceptualized knowledge is the knowledge acquired through formal training to perform job tasks in a particular field, while embodied knowledge is “something that they learn by doing and that is experientially learned, rather than acquired in a systematic, highly formal fashion” (Pratte and Rury, 1991, p.62). Schön (1983) called it the knowledge acquired through “reflection in action,” which is sometimes described as “thinking on our feet.” It involves examining experiences, connecting with feelings, and attending to theories in use, or put it simply, learning from ones experiences. However, this learning contributes to constructing new understandings and making on-the-spot decisions concerning our actions in a given situation. Schön claimed:

“The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.”  
(Schön, 1983, p.68)

Thus, teachers test their “theories” and this allows them to develop further responses and actions. To do this, they do not follow established concepts and techniques. Instead, they have to think with uniqueness and make optimum use of previous experiences and activities. Similarly, Polanyi (1967) defined it as “tacit knowledge,” a type of knowledge that is not captured by language or mathematics. Because of this elusive character, we can see it only by its actions. His argument was that the informed guesses, hunches, and imaginings gained through exploratory acts are motivated by what he describes as “passions.” They might well be aimed at discovering the “truth,” but are not necessarily in a form that can be stated in propositional or formal terms. Namely, tacit knowledge comprises a range of intuitive and sensory information and images that can be brought to bear when attempting to make sense of phenomena. Accumulated bits of tacit knowledge can help form a new model or theory. This eventually leads to obtaining expertise and enjoying the process of discovery, rather than relying on established theories and models.

“To hold such knowledge is an act deeply committed to the conviction that there is something there to be discovered. It is personal, in the sense of involving the personality of him who holds it, and also in the sense of being,

as a rule, solitary; but there is no trace in it of self-indulgence. The discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his services for revealing it. His act of knowing exercises a personal judgement in relating evidence to an external reality, an aspect of which he is seeking to apprehend.” (Polanyi 1967, p.24-5)

In addition, Freidson referred to Harper’s definition of “tacit intellectual skills” (quoted in Freidson, 2001, p.26), in which a mechanic or craftsman utilizes these skills when deciding how to handle various materials. This can also be called “knowledge in the body.” The tacit intellectual skills that make up tacit knowledge “cannot be codified or described systematically; they must be learned by practice, become part of the eye, ear and hand.” Although Freidson used the examples of mechanics and craftsmen, his description of tacit knowledge based on tacit intellectual skills is true for English teachers as well. Namely, English language teachers, regardless of their specialized field, gradually and intuitively learn how to interact with students and manage classes, which also includes a psychological aspect. Moreover, teachers exhibit “counseling” skills to lower students’ affective filter and allow them to engage with each other. In other words, they acquire tacit intellectual skills and knowledge in interpreting the students’ struggle to attribute meanings to words.

In addition to these skills, they have a certain level of professional autonomy. They can choose methods of instruction as well as those for planning and presenting course materials. That is, their discretionary judgment is exercised. Freidson argued that:

“...the tasks and their outcome are believed to be so indeterminate as to require attention to the variation to be found in individual cases. And while those whose occupation it is to perform such tasks will almost certainly engage in some routines that can be quite mechanical, it is believed that they must be prepared to be sensitive to the necessity of altering routine for individual circumstances that require discretionary judgment and action.” (Freidson, 2001, p.23)

Notably, this applies to language teaching. Language teachers not only teach the rules of the language but also consider students’ affect. Johnston (2003) defined the relationship between a teacher and student as the heart of education, contrasting this with the relationship between a lawyer and client by referring to it as less moral and more instrumental in character. Nevertheless, as Freidson implicated, teaching has further

potential for innovation and creativity.

However, the tacit intellectual skills and knowledge and discretionary judgment are sometimes undervalued due to a widespread misconception. Medgyes shares the following about a subgroup of international English language teachers:

“...there are thousands of unqualified or underqualified native speakers teaching English in all corners of the world. Most of them are adventurous youngsters with backpacks, who are impelled by a desire to see the world, meet interesting people, learn foreign languages, and meanwhile make a bit of money out of ELT..While sympathizing with their stamina and goodwill, I must admit that they are doing considerable disservice to ELT by decreasing the level of professionalism.” (Medgyes, 1994, p.66)

Medgyes refers to native English speakers who lack formal training in language teaching.

Unfortunately, a common misconception is that those who speak a language are automatically qualified to teach it. This leads to the depreciation of language teaching and its teachers, although the need for English language skills is recognized. Some Japanese English language teachers fit this description in a different way: they may speak the language well but have inadequate knowledge to successfully teach it because they specialized in English-related subjects, such as English literature, linguistics, speech pathology or sociology and so on. Therefore, they never learned about second language acquisition and language teaching methodology.

Thus, tacit intellectual skills and tacit knowledge may be associated with the lack of expert knowledge. Professionals are expected to have the requisite expertise to optimally perform their job tasks. The status of a profession has partially been a reflection of its identification with a distinctive body of knowledge. Due to this expertise and knowledge, organizations that employ professionals are not typically based on the authority of supervisors, but rather on a collegial relationship among peers (Ambrosie and Harley, 1988). “Professionalism also contains some notions of collegiality and community ethics; important in contemporary societies.” (Popkewitz, 1994, p.3)

To teach the language, a high level of proficiency in the language and tacit intellectual skills are insufficient; explicit and declarative knowledge about the language is also required. Therefore, “a knowledge base for teaching” (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996, p.5) is required to reinvent teacher professionalism. This teacher knowledge base should consist of “a codified or codifiable aggregation of knowledge, skill, understanding and

technology, of ethics and disposition, of collective responsibility—as well as a means of representing it” (Shulman, 1987; quoted in Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996, p.6). An important element of this knowledge base is what Shulman terms “pedagogical content knowledge,” “that amalgam of content and pedagogy that in uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding.”

Perhaps the paucity of this *pedagogical content knowledge*, as well as insufficient recognition of their “craft,” causes people to perceive English language teachers as quasi-professionals, even though they have a certain level of professional autonomy to exercise discretionary judgment, the ability to think on their feet, and tacit knowledge and intellectual skills. However, Goodson and Hargreaves also raised an alarm on this aspect of professionalism. They insisted that calling for a knowledge base founded on scientific certainty also undermines teachers’ professionalism in terms of the ethics and purposes that guide teachers’ actions and the extent to which teachers are able to pursue these purposes with fidelity and integrity.

## **2. Teachers are Technicians: The More Technical, The Less Professional**

French sociologists Jamous and Peloille (1970; quoted in Traynor, 2009) set out a theory of professional work. They proposed that professional work could be understood as a combination of technically defined activities and the formation of expert judgments, which can only be made by individuals with personal qualities distinctive from those within the profession. They termed the two dimensions technicality and indeterminacy. According to their theory, if a group such as medical professions accounted for its practices in terms of its technical complexity and explicit public rules and procedures, this risked the possibility of intervention and control by other groups because of the predictability of work. To avoid this, the group might emphasize the indeterminacy of its work, which would call for professional judgment or the use of tacit or expert knowledge; therefore, their profession could emphasize the social qualities of its members, which make them uniquely able to make such judgments. Similarly, Hargreaves (1994; quoted in Whitty, 2006) suggested that the conventional notion of professionalism is one “which is grounded in notions of esoteric knowledge, specialist expertise and public stats,” and that this is being superseded by one which involves “the exercise of discretionary judgment within conditions of unavoidable and perpetual uncertainty.” In reaction to his argument, Whitty (2006) argued that in the teaching profession, as elsewhere, rationalization is being emphasized, which involves much clearer expectations for their achievements, rather than leaving it to professional judgment. In addition, the current move toward



competence- or “standards-” based training for teachers is sponsored by the government and the Teacher Training Agency; this can force teachers to become technicians rather than “reflective professionals” (Adamas and Tulasiewicz, 1995; quoted in Whitty, 2006). Similarly, as Furlong (2005) noted, decisions about what to teach, how to teach, and how to assess children are now being made at the school and national levels, and thus, individual teachers are seen as less essential actors in the classroom.

The English language programs conducted by language centers in many universities in Japan have undergone significant reforms, with the unified curriculum implemented being the most notable change. The main objective of the curriculum is to standardize the lessons and their assessment, as outlined in the unified syllabus and instructors’ handbook. Classes are usually divided into several levels according to the students’ abilities, and the syllabus is designed to reflect the differences in the levels. The previous commentators’ observations on the impact of reforms on teacher professionalism, along with my university reform, imply the de-skilling and de-professionalization of teachers. These actions reflect the comments by Jamous and Peloille (1970) —those with a low status or on the fringes of powerful professional groups are more likely to promote technicality-led reform, whereas the core establishment is likely to resist with assertions of indeterminacy. According to Popkewitz (1994), rationalization-oriented reforms in the name of teacher professionalization made teaching bureaucratic and devalue intellectual focus. Even current reforms that include systematic requirements for teacher accountability have led to increased teacher workload and the monitoring of teacher practices. He proposed, with irony:

“If this brief review of the different meanings of professionalism is correct, then reforms that offer teachers greater autonomy and responsibility require a systematic examination of how teaching practices, the conceptions of evaluation, and school social patterns can limit or restrain the work of teaching and teacher education.” (Popkewitz, 1994, p.4)

As mentioned earlier, Schön (1983) also rejected this technical rationality as the foundation of professional knowledge. His notion “reflection in action” may support this idea.

### **3. English Language Teachers are Blended Professionals in a Third Space**

The language center in my university was established in 2004 due to the influence of a

major reform in Japanese higher education, which began in the late 1990s. The English teachers embarked on their careers during this era of internal reforms. As a background for these reforms, the Japanese academy had been questioning the traditional role of professors, well known for their apathy toward teaching and their preference for conducting research (e.g., Amano and Poole, 2005; Goodman, 2005; Newby *et al.*, 2009). University teachers are now often required to participate in various activities, along with serving on various committees, both of which result in less time for research. For example, they are now asked to engage in administrative jobs such as a recruitment activity called open campus, which usually takes place on weekends or during school holidays. They are also expected to attend workshops on English-related activities, develop curriculum, design entrance examinations, proctor entrance examinations, and accompany students on study-abroad trips. This trend has also had a significant influence on the English teachers in the language center. They were originally hired as practical language teachers, but are now required to participate in these administrative jobs. Specifically, the English teachers not only focus on the academic domain such as teaching and research but also spend significant time on extracurricular tasks. According to Whitchurch (2008), to meet complex social needs, higher education institutions and their workforce have expanded and diversified, and as a result, the boundary between an academic domain and an administrative or management (Whitchurch calls this professional) domain has become vague, which has contributed to the creation of a *third space*.

The emergence of this *third space* can lead to implications for academic identities (Hankel, 2000; Becher and Trowler, 2001; Barnett, 2005; Barnett and di Napoli, 2008; Kogan and Teichler, 2008; quoted in Whitchurch, 2008, p.3). In light of this third space, as defined by Whitchurch, it can be said that the English teachers in the language center exist in a third space between professional and academic domains. As academic staff, they undertake teaching, research, and “third-leg” activities. Alongside these roles, they engage in “perimeter” roles such as pastoral support, curriculum development for new programs, and workshops on study abroad programs for students. Over time, these “perimeter” roles have increasingly converged in the *third space* around broadly based projects (Whitchurch, 2008, p.7). They now must function in these circumstances.

Whitchurch adds that mainstream academic staff are primarily concerned with teaching and research, while the *third space* between professional and academic domains is primarily colonized by unbounded and blended professionals. According to her categories of professional identities, the English teachers in the language center may be categorized as *blended professionals* who are being recruited to dedicated

appointments that span both professional and academic domains. As she mentions, this new form of blended professionals, with their mixed backgrounds and portfolios, is dedicated to combining elements of both professional and academic domains. Similar to professional staff work across and beyond boundaries, academic staff must do the same.

Furthermore, interactions with academics in regular departments are included in shaping the identity of English teachers, which includes power and a participant's placement on the workplace trajectory (Wenger, 1998). The English teachers in the language center exist between what Wenger (1998) terms the "inbound trajectory" and the "legitimate peripheral participants" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This placement limits their involvement in university affairs due to their fixed-term contracts, even though they are seen as blended professionals. Therefore, they are not expected to participate fully in the university and have a mixed identity of both participation and non-participation. This complicates the alignment of their practices with academics in the regular departments as well and makes them unable to join the inside trajectory to higher status. Neither will they have the opportunity to become the president or dean, nor will they be assigned any influential decision-making position. Burke argues this in the context of the widening participation (WP) of professionalism:

"Complex power relations are at play within universities, which are intensely hierarchical institutions, although of course this plays out in different ways across a highly differentiated higher education system" (Burke, 2008, p.129)

As a result, the English teachers in the language center do not completely align themselves with the academics in regular academic departments. However, when their commitments are highly recognized, they feel a sense of partial alignment. According to Wenger, one of the crucial aspects of belonging to a community is having one's ideas accepted and adopted by members of that community. *Alignment* is one of Wenger's *modes of belonging* (1998) and contributes to the formation of identity. He claims that aligning with the practices of a community allows members to direct their energies toward common goals (*community of practice*). Also, according to Taylor (1999), the key factor in the formation of academic identities is identification with one's discipline as embodied by one's department, and not one's institution. In these circumstances, they completely engage in teaching, research and administrative tasks.

Another one of Wenger's *modes of belonging* is *engagement*, which is defined as the common enterprises of people as members of a particular group and another source of identity formation. Similarly, Clarke (2008, p.36) remarked that *engagement* provides

a means for community members to define, maintain, and negotiate their activities and practices, and produces a space for creating and recreating identities. Although they *engage* in the same responsibilities, they differ in the way they see themselves, their students, and their colleagues. Nagatomo argued:

“Imagination provides people with interpretive tools for placing themselves within the broader context in which they exist and explains why people have different perceptions even when engaging in the same enterprises.” (Nagatomo, 2012, p.85)

Namely, they have their own “professional imagination” (Power, 2008, p.144). Their views of themselves as English language teachers are largely influenced by their image of their former teachers. Their pedagogical decisions in the classroom depend on the perceptions of their current students in relationship to themselves, their current students’ beliefs about them as teachers, and their personal beliefs concerning their students learning goals (Nagatomo, 2012, p.89). In this way, *imagination* helps teachers view themselves and their profession in new ways. Wenger states that, concerning the *modes of belonging*, *imagination* is important because

“it is through imagination that we see our own practices as continuing histories that reach far into the past, and it is through imagination that we conceive of new developments, explore alternatives and envision possible futures.”

(Wenger, 1998, p.178)

In addition, Wright also mentions:

“the development of a professional imagination will enable professionals to gauge a sense of their own efficacy within contemporary setting without resorting either to an over-individualised or to an over-determined position”

(Wright, 1970; quoted in Power, 2008, p.144)

These imaginings or perceptions create the form of their faith. According to Johnston (2003, p.8), decisions and actions are motivated by the beliefs held by individuals that cannot be based in or justified by reason alone, but rather based on instincts and personal experiences. He calls these kinds of beliefs *faith*. Thus, English language teachers conduct English language classes with the faith that they are doing the right

thing. Ultimately, this faith will lead to their tacit knowledge, as mentioned earlier.

### **Ethical dilemmas of professionalism**

Thus, the English teachers in the language center constructed their professional identity as English language teachers according to three modes of belonging, as suggested by Wenger's theory: *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. However, at the same time, there is an ongoing contradiction in their professional identity as English teachers and in the values underlying their work. Although they try to conceive themselves as professionals and gradually force their students and other people to perceive them as such, they acknowledge that other people in their work context, including the administration, do not share this view. That is, an underlying contradiction exists between the internal expectations of professionalism and the external failure to support these expectations (Johnston, 2001, p.110) or between "claimed identity" and "assigned identity" (Barcelos, 2001). An assigned identity is seen as an individual encoded by sociopolitical contexts: for example, the unavailability of tenure for the English teachers in the language center. This causes a conflict of professionalism, especially as the end of their contract term approaches. Their focus at this point is on finding a new position, and not teaching or taking care of students. Some teachers avoid volunteering and extra work hours for the sake of their students or the organization. This may coincide with Hargreaves (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996, p19) description of, "... a category of lower-paid and less-skilled educational personnel who would carry out the less complex tasks of teaching."

In contrast, they seem to enjoy their marginalized position to some extent. Free from extremely serious commitments and duties such as personnel selection, which is indeed burdening, they can devote more time toward activities that they consider important. For instance, they are able to spend more time doing research, writing papers, or attending conferences. Marginality can, in some circumstances, lead to empowerment and an opportunity for subtle forms of resistance (Giroux, 1988). They are not able to be altruistic, as is traditionally required in professionalism, although they mentally feel guilty at their lack of enthusiasm for teaching or cooperating with the organization. In this way, being in opposition makes them experience some "ethical dilemmas" (Lunt, 2008) related to their professionalism and identity as English language teachers. Lunt (2008, p.82) says, "Even though there is widespread agreement both internationally and across different professional groups as to fundamental ethical principles that guide 'ethical' behavior (Gauthier, 2005; quoted in Lunt, 2008, p.82), their very formality and abstract nature may not help the individual professional faced with a complex ethical

dilemma in a situation of professional isolation.” Therefore, the English language teachers in the language center have found themselves in a tenuous position on campus. Hargreaves described this type of position as follows:

“Collectively and individually, teachers themselves have also often seemed ambivalent about whether their identity is that of professionals or cultural workers. They have therefore been uncertain and inconsistent about whether they should pursue middle class status in ‘acceptable professional’ ways, or use collective strategies of union bargaining to defend their interests.”

(Ginsbur et al., 1980; Carlson, 1992; Bascia, 1994; quoted in Hargreaves, 1996)

Teachers who possess a spirit of volunteerism may choose to work extra hours out of a sense of duty or ethical professionalism. Lunt says, “Given the potential fallibility of ethical codes to regulate behavior, can the ‘special relationship’ between professionals and society continue to be justified?” Teachers’ spirit of professionalism allows them to not only hand over their knowledge and skills to their students but also build a rapport with them, in which authority and solidarity are presented and well balanced. Lunt here refers to O’Neill’s suggestion that professionals continue to be trusted.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Many questions remain unanswered regarding teacher professionalism, particularly in relationship to English language teachers in language centers in Japanese universities’ contexts. Although they have high academic credentials in English-related subjects and proficiency in the English language, some lack *a knowledge base for teaching*. That is, they know the language, but do not know how to teach it systematically and interact with their students in the context of teaching. Through *reflection in action*, however, they start to rely on tacit intellectual skills and obtain tacit knowledge that conventional professionals possess.

On the other hand, as Millerson (1964; quoted in Whitty, 2006, p2) defined, the nature of professionalism includes the use of skills based on theoretical knowledge, along with education and training in those skills as certified by examination. This knowledge is different from tacit knowledge. Excessive trust in *the knowledge base for teaching*, however, may also lead to the danger of de-professionalization. From these perspectives, it is not easy to label the English language teachers in language centers as professionals, as described in this paper; in fact, it is very complex. After all, it may not be necessary to compromise, as Sodar’s (1990, quoted in Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996, p.6) explains:

“teachers cannot achieve the high status of medicine by following the medical model of professionalization.” Goodson and Hargreaves added the reason that “pedagogical content knowledge, cooperative learning strategies and the like scarcely constitute the kinds of scientific and technological breakthroughs achieved by medicine.”

As for their status in the university, the position of English language teachers in language centers is blurry (in a third space), so they require collaborative relationships with administrators and academics (professors) to move forward. Whitty (2006) argued:

“A democratic professionalism would seek to demystify professional work and build alliances between teachers and other members of the school workforce, such as teaching assistants, and external stakeholders, including students, parents and members of the wider community.” (Whitty, 2006, p.14)

In short, Whitty suggested that the professions need to be open to the people concerned. Although she is talking about the primary and secondary schools settings in Britain and Northern Ireland, this may also apply to the English language teachers in my university’s language center and realistically to other language centers in Japan. Indeed, as the number of third space professionals has been increasing in Japan (or perhaps around the world), a more democratic version of professionalism would build stronger professional bodies.

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