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Dealing with “Identity Slippage”:
A Few Considerations based on Life Story Interviews
With a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher

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This article discusses how Dana, a non-native Japanese language teacher from Romania, constantly “slides” between two of her identities: language learner, and language teacher. The data used in the analysis come from life story interviews edited to create a coherent narrative. My focus is on the relationship between the two identities, as I propose they form a continuum inside which Dana moves back and forth. As a way to explain the functioning of this continuum, I use the concept of “identity slippage” put forth by Armour (2000). In the discussion of my interpretation of the data, I also touch upon the role of the life story interview as a locus that can empower both interviewer and interviewee, and upon its significance for research in the field of Japanese language education.

I have been a Japanese language teacher for almost fifteen years. I worked in a university in Romania for ten years, and for the last five and a half years I have been living and teaching in Japan. I started studying French in middle school, when I was 10 years old, and then English, one year later. Japanese is the only foreign language I studied as an adult (as an undergraduate student), but it has somehow become the most important of all three, shaping my professional career, my present, my future, and my identity.

But why has this happened? How, when, and, most importantly, why has the Japanese language become such a big part of my life? Why has this language, that I struggled so much to master (to the point of almost falling prey to despair and depression), changed me so profoundly and in so many ways? Why do I still consider myself a Japanese language teacher even though I have not taught Japanese ever since I came to Japan five years ago?

These are some of the questions that flicker in my mind whenever I have to introduce myself or talk about my experience of learning foreign languages. They are always there, somewhere in the background, constantly encouraging and at the same time challenging my attempts to define my own identity. I often find myself switching from one facet to another, sometimes during one single conversation; when I am in class as a teacher, I draw on my experience as a learner, and when I learn something new I immediately relate it to my insight as a teacher. And yet, I am not the only one who is haunted by interrogations such as these. Over the years, I have met many other Japanese language teachers, both from Romania and from other countries, both native and non-native, who brooded over similar issues. Some of these encounters eventually became milestones in the course of my life, as my colleagues, unbeknownst to them, turned out to be mirrors that sent back reflections of myself, and lenses that zoomed in to larger issues such as the meaning of learning a language, the process of finding one's own voice, or the sense of belonging to a community.

These questions and these encounters represent the starting point for this article. This study is part of a larger project that aims to shed new light on our understanding of the process of learning and teaching a language, and on the way in which we construct and represent our personal identities in the course of that process, by looking into the life stories of non-native Japanese language teachers.

Premises and and positioning

In this section, I briefly discuss my reasons for choosing life story interviews, and my positioning with respect to the literature in the field. The *enjeu* of my study is twofold: on the one hand, I look at language learning from a Vygotskyan perspective, i.e. not as the mere acquisition of a new set of lexical and grammatical items, but rather as a socio-cultural experience through which we as human beings participate in the “lifeworld of another culture” and in a community of learners. In this, I follow Pavlenko and Lantolf’s (2000) line of thought, as well as Donato’s (2000) suggestion that learning is a “form of language socialization between individuals and not merely information processing carried out solo by an individual” (p. 33). On the other hand, I attempt to give a “voice” to the teachers themselves.

In the field of Japanese language education, there are numerous studies that focus on learners and / or teachers. However, as Miyo (2015) and others point out, a large portion of these studies are quantitative and use data collected through questionnaires and surveys in which individuals become mere statistical numbers, and which do little to clarify the meaning or the significance of learning. They are, of course, important in that they can indicate certain trends or tendencies, but they are insufficient as they fail to take into account the socio-cultural component. As Miyo puts it¹:

The main purpose of life story research in the field of Japanese language education has been to listen to the voices of the people involved in Japanese language education and research, people who had never been listened to. By listening to their life stories, researchers as well as all those involved in the field who read the accounts gain fresh, new insights that challenge things that had been taken for granted, or that bring to the fore things that had been overlooked. To put it another way, I think it’s safe to say that before introducing life story research, the field of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Japanese are mine.

Japanese language education did not pay much attention to listening to the “voices” of the various individuals. (2013, p. 65)

In other words, in order to have a more complete image of language education, we need to have qualitative studies as well, as they can provide us with new perspectives useful in understanding the complex processes at stake in language learning. This is where life story research comes into play.

Discussing the importance of life story interviews in Japanese language education, Kawakami states the following:

“What do you talk about in your life story?” - the question I asked in the beginning does not allude to something that the investigator might ask the collaborator. It’s rather an interrogation that refers to the “Japanese language education narrative” of the investigator herself, including everything from the “social reality” that she talks about, to the story she tells about the kind of practice she does in Japanese language education. To answer this interrogation is the task of all those involved in life story research in Japanese language education. (2015, p. 48)

His suggestion is that the story told through the interview represents in fact an investigation into the whole process of learning and teaching, as it becomes a locus for reflection where the account of one individual’s lived experience can gain enough weight and momentum to become relevant for a whole community or for an entire discipline. The story of one is in fact the story of many.

As one of the many, I, the investigator, share something important with Dana, my collaborator for this study: we are both non-native speakers of Japanese and, as such, we also share the experience of being first a learner and then a teacher of Japanese. To a certain extent, her story is my story and my story is hers.

Dealing with “Identity Slippage” : A Few Considerations based on Life Story
Interviews With a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher

Before moving into the data, I would like to also clarify the theoretical framework I used for analysis. I draw on Armour’s (2000 and 2004) notion of “identity slippage”, which he defines as follows:

[I] discussed the theoretical notion of identity slippage in relation to changing from an enculturated identity to an acculturated one that has been activated by the learning and subsequent “use” of a L2 *in situ*. I will redesign the notion of identity slippage to encompass a view that identities are co-constructed through a range of discourses (verbal, gestural and so on) [...]. The agent slips from one identity to another dependent on such discourses. In this context, slipping evokes positive notions of quick but soft movement, breaking easily away from a coherent and stable foundation or place with the added sense of avoiding detection or apprehension. (2004, pp. 103-104)

I use “identity slippage” to track and explain how and why my collaborator moves back and forth between the two poles of Japanese language learner and teacher, respectively. My assumption is that her “slippage” is not voluntary or conscious, i.e. when recounting her lived experience she does not choose (or, to be more exact, she *can not* choose) when and how to present one of her two facets, as they are deeply ingrained within her self. In my view, this “slippage” is almost never a swift, or complete movement: Dana is never 100% learner, and the next minute 100% teacher. Such a radical switch would of course be impossible. Instead, “slippage” is a slow, incomplete, sometimes almost imperceptible change from one pole toward the other on a convoluted axis that represents the learner-teacher continuum.

Metaphorically, the “slippage” is somewhat similar to the volume knob on an old radio: if you raise it too much, the voices and the static become too loud to be comprehensible, and if you lower it too much then they are inaudible. You just gently

adjust the knob between the two extremes, constantly trying to get the best sound. In a way, this is exactly what Dana is doing: fine-tuning through her identities in order to find her “voice”.

Just like Armour, I interpret “identity slippage” as a positive notion that is linked to other notions such as self-affirmation and empowerment. For Dana, “slipping” between learner and teacher is an enriching experience, one that allows her to gain new perspectives on numerous aspects of her career and of her life. Certainly, Dana has other identities as well - as a woman, as a language user, as a Romanian living in Japan etc. - but for the present study I will only focus on the learner and teacher facets.

Method

My approach to life story research follows Sakurai’s (2002 and 2012) notion of “dialogical constructivism”, which suggests that the story is actually the result of a collaborative effort in which both the interviewer and the interviewee play equally important parts. Thus, the story is never just “told” unidirectionally by one individual (the interviewee) to another (the interviewer); instead, it is co-constructed through the interview, with equally important input from both sides. As Sakurai puts it,

Telling a story represents so much more than talking about facts and experiences from the past, as it is an instance of both the narrator and the interviewer living in the “here” and the “now”. [...] The interview itself represents a locus where the cultural practice of constructing a life story takes place. (2002, p. 31)

In this approach, the interviewer and the interviewee are on an equal footing, working together to create an account that is significant and relevant to both. They each tell their story and they each ask questions, cooperating to construct a common narrative.

Thus, the relationship between them is never a hierarchical one. In this sense, I feel that that the terms “investigator” and “informant” are not appropriate as they establish an unnatural distance; instead of “informant”, I will use the term “collaborator” to refer to Dana.

Moreover, Sakurai also proposes that, when analyzing the data collected through the interview, the researcher must interpret the interview itself as a lived experience that becomes part of the story as well. In order to render the account as faithfully as possible, the analysis must also include elements that are usually overlooked or relegated to a second plane (such as gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence etc.), as they are extremely telling in terms of the narrator’s attitude toward the story:

The emotions and the assessments of the narrator are indicators of the significance of the story. [...] Therefore, we are interested not only in *what* the narrator told us, but also in *how* the narrator told the story. (2012 p. 64)

In the field notes I took during the interviews with Dana, I tried to record these elements as accurately as possible and, whenever necessary and relevant, I will include them as factors in the analysis.

Dana’s story

At the time I started collecting the data in 2012, Dana, my collaborator, was 31 years old. I first met her in 2002, at a time when I had just started my career as a teacher of Japanese language and culture and I was working part-time in a private university in Bucharest, Romania. Dana was a fourth-year student in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, majoring in English and Japanese. She was rather quiet, perhaps a bit shy, but always punctual, serious and eager to learn. She took two of my Japanese language classes and a

seminar in Japanese literature, and her grades were always excellent. Immediately after graduation, she became an assistant at the same university, taking over the position I had filled until then and thus starting her own career as a Japanese language teacher. Over the years, our paths crossed many times in various places and contexts, from classrooms to professional gatherings, to the Japanese Language Teachers' Association Steering Committee (she was vice-president during my mandates as president), to various study groups and Japanese language education events. In time, we became friends and I got to know her in great depth. Trust between us was easily established as soon as we became colleagues, as her attitude was extremely open and amicable from the very beginning. Therefore, data collection was easy, as we had already established a close rapport. Dana responded very positively to my request for a life story interview: she answered all questions without reservation, she checked the transcript and, last but not least, she read the first draft of this paper and made several insightful comments and observations. She was keen to take part in my research, proving to be a suitable collaborator in terms of gender, age, and background as a Japanese language learner and teacher.

Interviewing Dana revealed an extremely interesting - and, at times, contradictory and conflicting - plurality of identities: she talked about herself as a woman, as a friend (of mine), as a Romanian living in Japan, as a non-native speaker of Japanese and English, as a language learner, as a language teacher etc.. In this article, I focus my analysis on the last two identities mentioned above (language learner and language teacher). Specifically, I examine the way in which Dana constructs her identity between these two poles and the way in which she tries to deal with her emotions and feelings (from self-esteem to vulnerability) in her becoming as a human being.

This study is based on an analysis of the data collected not only through the life story interviews, but also through the field notes I took on various occasions when I worked together with Dana in Romania and during the preliminary meetings we had *before* the

interviews, and through the correspondence and discussions we carried *after* the interviews in the process of verifying the transcript and my interpretation of, and perspective on, her story. The focal point of my research is the way in which Dana (re)constructs and expresses her identities through an account of her lived experiences.

I interviewed Dana three times over a period of three years. The first interview was carried out in her home in the Kantō area in Japan and lasted for about 2½ hours, while subsequent interviews were conducted in two different cafes in Tōkyō, their duration being between 1½ and 2 hours. I recorded all the interviews, transcribed them, and then showed the transcript to Dana for confirmation. My initial coding of the data consisted in identifying and labeling significant chapters² in her story, such as “Japanese Language Summer School”, “*Matsuri* at the university”, or “training program in Japan”. During subsequent readings of the data, I grouped several topics under specific headings and then categorized them into clusters such as “learning Japanese”, “teaching Japanese”, “using Japanese”, “living in Japan”, and “relationship with the students”.

To ensure the veracity and integrity of Dana’s story, I will use direct quotations from the interviews, translated from Romanian as faithfully as possible. In order to accurately convey her “voice”, I tried not to change any of the idiosyncrasies of her discourse (such as the fact that she prefers to use Japanese words for certain notions), and to stifle my own “voice” when it seemed to become too loud. However, as I showed in the previous section, I consider the interview a locus where the life story is created collaboratively, so at times there will actually be two characters in the narrative. Last, but not least, the account presented here is not linear or chronological, as the story told by Dana was not, either.

² When defining “chapters” in life stories, Kirkegaard Thomsen states that “memory for different activities and episodes stretching over an extended period of time and relating to the same higher order activity. Because specific memories are often operationalised as lasting less than 24 hours, logically chapters may extend from 24 hours to several years.” (2009, p. 446)

Dana in the learner-teacher continuum

For Dana, starting to learn Japanese was not a matter of choice, but rather a coincidence. Just as she was taking the high school graduation exams, a tragedy happened in her family that affected her emotionally, making her feel vulnerable, insecure and powerless. During the summer holiday, she tried to recover, but she was unable to gather enough strength to concentrate on studying for the entrance examination to one of the state universities in Bucharest, so she opted instead for one of the private ones, where she could enter based solely on the grades she had got in high school. Just as she was filling in some forms and preparing to submit all the papers at the Admissions Office, another family member who had accompanied her to the university overheard a conversation between the dean and another staff member - they were talking about the Japanese language program, which was scheduled to start that year. She made the suggestion to Dana that she might want to try something new and learn Japanese. Dana had originally planned to continue to study English and Italian (languages she was already fluent in as she had studied them through middle and high school), so she was hesitant at first, with no signs of enthusiasm to the idea. However, the family member who was with her was very persistent, and Dana eventually changed her mind and enrolled for the English major with a Japanese minor.

Her assessment of the experiences she had during her first three years as a learner of Japanese is not very positive; thus, when she talks about the way she studied, she describes the methods one of her language teachers used as traumatic:

He would teach each and every grammar or vocabulary item as if they were completely separate entities, each in its own separate slot, with no connection whatsoever between them.

Dealing with “Identity Slippage” : A Few Considerations based on Life Story
Interviews With a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher

[...] At home, I would study from morning to night, copying all the *kanji*³ from the textbook and then copying the text of the lesson, as he had told us to do. I did everything he told us to do, I went through that *Shoho* book four times, but it didn't really work. I didn't know how to speak, I couldn't communicate with anybody in Japanese. And then later on, after I became a teacher and I started going to the meetings of the Association at the Embassy, I remember crying because I couldn't understand a word at those meetings.

Dana is referring here to *Nihongo Shoho* (“First Steps in Japanese”), a textbook for beginner-level students that was originally published by the Japan Foundation in the 1980s for use in Japan. The textbook is entirely in Japanese, so students have to rely on the explanations of a teacher to go through it. By mentioning this episode, Dana also alludes to the fact that, as a learner, she wanted to know not just *what* she should learn, but *how* she should learn. She also mentions her inability to speak Japanese in spite of her studying hard, and she links this to her inability to express herself in front of her peers after becoming a teacher, during the preliminary meetings that would eventually lead to the creation of the Japanese Language Teachers' Association.

In this fragment we can also see an instance of Dana's “identity slippage”, as she moves within the space of two sentences from her traumatic experience as a student to another traumatic one, this time as a teacher. These experiences seem to be like the two sides of the same coin, separate yet inseparable, closely linked in the learner-teacher continuum as Dana groups them together through a feeling of powerlessness and a sense of incompetence.

In her account, Dana criticizes other teachers as well:

³ All the words Dana says in Japanese during the interview are italicized.

When I was a student, I guess I was just a stupid kid. But now, I actually blame the system for that. A lot. I mean, we had all these teachers coming in and trying to explain stuff to us, but the biggest problem was that none of them actually knew how to bring knowledge closer to us. Do you know what I mean? They would just come in, sit down at the big desk in front of the room, take out their notes and start reading them aloud for us to write down. Nothing was interactive, everything was about pouring knowledge into our heads.

Immediately, I asked Dana what she meant by “stupid kid”, as I felt that it was an essential keyword that had a lot to do with the way in which she interiorizes her experiences as a student - not only as a learner of Japanese, but as a student in general. She answered that by “stupid kid” she wanted to say that she was actually rather naïve, in the sense that she took things for granted and didn’t believe that she had the power to change them. If teachers came in and just recited the content, it meant that this was what they were supposed to do.

My first impulse was to categorize this account as another instance of her feeling of powerlessness, but when - after the interview, during the data analysis process - I tried to confirm this with Dana, she contradicted me. Her own assessment was that the situation was not one of powerlessness, but that she was rather overcome by a sense of personal futility. When I asked what she meant by that, she added that

You know that saying, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas”... Well, it was kind of like that. What happened in school stayed in school. What happened outside of school stayed outside. There was absolutely no connection between the two, no bridge, just a huge gap. I felt like nothing I learn in school was useful to me when I was not in class. That bridge only started to appear now, when I am in my 30s. That’s why I felt useless, I saw no point in going to school any more.

Dealing with “Identity Slippage” : A Few Considerations based on Life Story
Interviews With a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher

In this comment from Dana we can discern another element that pertains to her identity as a learner, in terms of what her expectations are toward the learning process. She seems to be hoping for active implication in class, and for an abrogation, or an abolition of the distance between teacher and learner. This translates as well into her identity as a teacher: she repeats on numerous occasions throughout the interviews that she tries to constantly reflect on her own practice so that she can improve it, and that she doesn't want to “become like those guys”, i.e. the teachers who just recited the content of the course. In a sense, she has negative role models that she tries to repudiate. She does not refute this memory as a bad one, but instead tries to build on it and use it as a resource, or landmark, for her growth as a teacher.

Prompted by my request to give an example of how this kind of experience from the past helps her growth in the present, she replied:

For example, I'm not at all happy with the way I teach *kanji* right now. I have used the same books as my teachers, and the same methods, at least in my years as a novice teacher. But at some point I realized that this is not what the students need. It doesn't really matter how many *kanji* they know, but what they can do with the ones they already know.

As can be seen here, the fact that Dana-the-teacher draws on the past experiences of Dana-the-student helps her be more empathetic - not only as an educator, but as a human being as well. This is yet another instance of “identity slippage”, and at the same time an example of how the interview is constructed collaboratively, as my voice is added to Dana's to create the narrative. Moreover, starting from this exchange, she begins to talk about the experiences she had taking my classes, so at this point my position becomes more complicated: I'm no longer just a *co-creator* of the story, but a *character* within the

story of Dana's life. My story is her story not only because we share it, but also because I am in it.

When assessing her experience of my classes, Dana is by no means less harsh in her criticism. She tells me rather bluntly that she actually enjoyed my classes, but the reason for that is that she evaluated them through the eyes of the "stupid kid" who didn't have the means and the knowledge necessary to make a comparison. The classes were interesting because I was doing things differently - not necessarily better. Then she added that, knowing what she knows now as a teacher, she probably wouldn't enjoy my classes any more and would think of me as an example of what she should *not* become as an educator. And finally she concluded by saying that "But I know you have changed a lot, too."

This exchange took place in the "here" and the "now" of the interview, and even though it referred to a "there" and "then", the "there" and "then" are only possible and significant because of the "here" and "now". In other words, the lived experience only acquires meaning when it is told - or, in fact, co-created - as a story.

Concluding remarks

To give another example of how Dana slides back and forth in the learner-teacher continuum, here is another fragment from the interview, where she talks about her experiences after coming to Japan - specifically, she is referring to an episode where her PhD program supervisor asked her to conduct a mock lesson for undergraduate students:

Now that I'm here, there are so many new things to learn! Even if I don't go to school, just the simple fact of living here, immersed in the language, it's so exciting and fresh! Of course, I learn a lot in school as well... The other day, for instance, when I was done with that lesson, Z [another PhD student] came to me and said: "Wow! I could tell you're a teacher, it was so

Dealing with “Identity Slippage” : A Few Considerations based on Life Story
Interviews With a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher

obvious in the way you were moving around the room, and in the way you were relating to the students!” I was full of energy after that, for a whole week. It felt so good. The best part was that we did team teaching, and my partner was a *bogowasha*, but even though she knew a lot more Japanese than I do, I related so much better to the students than her. And that’s what matters to me as a teacher.

As can be seen here, the two identities discussed in this article have somewhat fuzzy boundaries. When recounting this particular episode, Dana was exuberant, smiling a lot, and talking extremely fast; it was obvious that her assessment of the episode was very positive. However, there is no clear-cut distinction here between her identities: is she relating the story as a teacher reflecting on her practice as a teacher, or as a PhD student reflecting on her experience as a teacher, or, even more complicated, as a teacher reflecting on the experience of being a teacher, then becoming a PhD student, and then becoming a teacher again? Or maybe all of the above. The identity slippage is at least double-fold here, and the slide from one identity to another happens very fast in a very short span of time. This is undoubtedly one of the best example concerning the functioning of the learner-teacher continuum, where the two identities are so closely interwoven no one can tell them apart any more, and they amalgamate to create an even bigger identity, which is that of Dana as Dana, a human being.

At the same time, this is also an instance where Dana no longer feels vulnerable, powerless, or a “stupid kid” - her feelings range from exuberance to pride and self-confidence. In my reading of the data, Dana feels empowered here precisely because the interview functions as a locus that facilitates the hubris of the narrator, a haven where she can finally tell her story because she has a “voice”. It is our duty not to let this voice disappear, and to make it heard by as many as possible.

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Dealing with “Identity Slippage” : A Few Considerations based on Life Story
Interviews With a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher

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