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WHOSE ENGLISH, WHOSE RULES? LANGUAGE TEACHER IDENTITY AND AGENCY UNDER POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN TOKYO

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ABSTRACT

While research on language teacher identity (LTI) is extensive, a noticeable gap remains in poststructuralist-based studies within the Japanese context, specifically in exploring how non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) experience identity challenges and exercise agency within the national policy demands in secondary schools. This research explores the identity-related challenges faced by NNESTs and highlights the strategies they use to enact agency under English language policy mandates. Using a qualitative phenomenological research approach, the paper conducted semi-structured interviews with six Japanese English teachers in a Tokyo public high school. Data were analyzed through Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) to examine how educators experience, negotiate, and respond to policy demands and classroom realities. Identity-related pressures were identified, with teachers often shifting from authoritative roles to more facilitative ones in response to students' communicative competence and policy demands. Their agency was reflected in adaptive strategies such as translanguaging, differentiated instruction, and self-directed professional development. Overall, the research demonstrates that Japanese NNESTs are not merely policy implementers, but also informed practitioners who exercise agency and balance language policy expectations with the needs of their learners. Language policy frameworks may incorporate teacher inputs, allow greater pedagogical flexibility, and provide institutional support to foster sustainable and context-sensitive instruction.

Keywords: *NNESTs, MEXT policy, LTI, teacher agency, phenomenological research*

INTRODUCTION

English education in Japan is shaped by government policies, cultural views, and school systems. As English becomes increasingly important worldwide, Japan has implemented changes to enhance its teaching in schools (Kubota & Takeda, 2021). However, these changes come with challenges, such as extra work for teachers, strict hiring requirements, and rules that limit how lessons are taught. At the same time, debates continue on how to promote English while still valuing Japan's language and culture. (Rudolph, 2023) As a result, these challenges affect both teaching and learning.

In particular, the implementation of the English Language Policy (ELP) in Japan presents significant challenges for both teachers and students. Excessive administrative demands and inadequate training have increased teacher stress and reduced teaching effectiveness (Matsushita & Yamamura, 2022; Hojo, 2021). Moreover, there have been significant changes in the selection of public school teachers, including the

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introduction of a written aptitude test as the first stage of the English teacher recruitment process (Tokyo Board of Education, 2025). The intensive *"Kyoin Saiyo Shiken"* (Teacher Recruitment Examination) remains a major challenge for those aiming to teach at public schools (Kansai University of International Studies, 2025) relative to the ideal teacher profile set for the city's education system that highlights a high level of English teaching ability to nurture and develop children's strengths and potential, despite the abolishment of the teacher certification renewal system (Huang et al., 2023). In addition, strict English-only policies (e.g., Japan's Self-Access Learning Centers) have faced resistance as they often reduce student engagement by removing native language support (Thornton, 2023). Such challenges reflect broader tensions in Japan's language education policies, where efforts to promote English often intersect with strong cultural values and a commitment to preserving national identity. Prioritizing English proficiency may marginalize the role of native languages in education and diminish students' cultural values. (Hiratsuka et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2023; Rudolph, 2023). Moreover, the exclusion of students' first language in classrooms may not only affect comprehension but also influence their sense of cultural identity, reinforcing anxieties about language erosion (Khan, Rahman, & Hamid, 2021). As language learning is deeply tied to cultural context, overlooking this dimension in English instruction can limit both understanding and the practical application of the language (Hossain, 2023; Mohammed, 2020).

Compounding these issues, the mismatch between Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) policies and teachers' actual practices complicates the implementation of ELP. Many teachers rely on *yakudoku* (grammar-translation method) due to systemic pressure, prioritizing entrance exam preparation over communicative competence (Paxton, Yamazaki, & Kunert, 2022; Rubrecht, 2024). Although MEXT encourages Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to improve students' spoken English, this shift has met resistance, with some viewing English education as a threat to Japan's linguistic and cultural heritage. In contrast, others argue that it disproportionately benefits corporate interests (Flinn, 2024). The challenges extend to Non-Native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), who face conflicting policy expectations regarding their language proficiency and instructional roles. While some NNESTs embrace their position as language models, others express dissatisfaction with their proficiency, aspiring to attain 'native-like' fluency (Aoyama, 2021). MEXT's *Classroom English* guidance explicitly encourages teachers to use English 'as much as possible' during instruction and questioning, which underlines their position as role models in English (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), 2017). Furthermore, the 2023 revision to the Course of Study emphasizes that lessons should be conducted primarily in English, which reinforces English modeling as a standard practice, despite many educators continuing to encounter practical challenges (MEXT, 2023). The ongoing debate surrounding language teacher identity (LTI), or how educators perceive themselves and understand their role in relation to their work, highlights the need for further research to address both policy demands and student needs (Nall, 2021).

Language teacher identity is actively formed through an educator's interaction with students, colleagues, and curriculum. It is influenced and reshaped by different challenges and complexities present in their teaching environments (Yazan, 2023). Understanding how teachers navigate these tensions also requires a closer look at their "agency" within structural constraints. In this research, the agency is seen as a dynamic interplay of habit (past), imagination (future), and judgment (present), shaped by and shaping structural contexts (Deschênes & Parent, 2022). Specifically, it arises from the interaction of individual capacities (e.g., beliefs, skills), resources (e.g., material, relational), and contextual structures (e.g., policies, norms). This relational perspective sees agency as contextually situated, unlike views that equate it with individual empowerment. Investigating how teachers assert agency can provide valuable insights into their lived experiences and inform policies that more effectively support their work.

In light of this, proposed measures should not only address structural barriers but also actively enable teacher agency. One approach is to reduce administrative burdens by employing teaching assistants or administrative staff to handle non-teaching tasks, allowing educators to focus on instruction (Nath & Pandey, 2025). Increasing professional development opportunities with targeted training on communicative methods could enhance teacher competence and willingness to implement CLT (Qasserras, 2023). Moreover, providing ongoing language support, such as subsidized language courses and immersive English training, would help educators build confidence in their English proficiency (Betaubun, Rokhmah, & Budiasto, 2022).

A more flexible approach to language policy could also improve ELP implementation. Strategic use of students' first language (L1) has been shown to aid comprehension and reduce anxiety (Garner, 2024; Ngamchatturat et al., 2024; Zhao, 2023). Incorporating translanguaging pedagogy, where students construct meaning by using both L1 and English, enhances cognitive engagement and learning outcomes, as seen in Vietnam, Thailand, and Turkey (Thongwichit & Ulla, 2024; Vu et al., 2023; Karabulut & Dollar, 2022). Additionally, training teachers to be culturally sensitive and recognize students' linguistic backgrounds could lead to more tailored and effective instruction. The integration of Japanese culture into language learning can further boost engagement. Since Japanese culture is inherently inclusive and absorbs elements from other cultures (Shen et al., 2024), leveraging this aspect could create a more

immersive learning experience. Japanese speakers also seek commonality in communication through active alignments, a strategy that can be used to foster greater confidence in English speaking.

Offering culturally relevant, context-specific activities can help Japanese students build confidence in speaking English (Albertson, 2020). Integrating local cultural elements into English instruction has been shown to positively impact student attitudes and participation (Hicham et al., 2025; Ratri et al., 2024). The importance of flexibility in language teaching policies is further highlighted, as rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches can hinder the effective implementation of pedagogical strategies (Poole & Li, 2023).

By addressing administrative burdens, improving teacher training and language support, implementing flexible language policies, and integrating Japanese culture into language instruction, the effectiveness of ELPs in Japan can be enhanced. LTI plays a crucial role in this process and is shaped by various factors. These include teachers' personal connection to the language they teach, the knowledge gained through formal education and teaching experience, the contexts that support or limit their practice, and the relationships cultivated with students (Sadeghi & Bahari, 2022). These competencies, along with the language teachers' daily experiences, contribute to the continuous formation and reformation of their identities.

Despite extensive research on the increasingly recognized and dynamic construct of language teacher identity (Sang, 2020), gaps remain in understanding the difficulties encountered by NNESTs in Japan's basic education. Previous studies (Aoyama, 2021; Nall, 2021; Saito, 2023) have primarily focused on the tertiary level, leaving limited insight into how NNESTs at earlier educational stages navigate language policy expectations. Given MEXT's emphasis on positioning teachers as English language role models, it is essential to examine whether similar challenges persist in secondary education.

Moreover, some existing studies have not adopted poststructuralist perspectives (Hiratsuka, 2023), which conceptualize identity as fluid and shaped by discourse and power structures (Khan, Rahman, & Hamid, 2017). Applying this lens could offer more profound insight into how NNESTs construct their professional identities within policy constraints, particularly in light of the tension between their roles as professionals and as non-native English speakers. While MEXT policies mandate the proactive use of English, teachers often experience linguistic insecurity, which may hinder their ability to implement communicative approaches effectively (Hiratsuka, 2023). The discourse positions NNESTs as both language models and language learners, creating dual pressures that remain underexplored (Tan & Toh, 2025).

Furthermore, although the literature frequently highlights the struggles of NNESTs, it often overlooks teacher agency, specifically how educators adapt to, resist, or reshape policy expectations (Cong-Lem, 2024). In response to these gaps and drawing from the ecological conceptualization of teacher agency, this research explored how Japanese high school teachers' attitudes toward English language use shape their professional identities and influence the implementation of MEXT language policies. Specifically, the following research questions guided the inquiry:

The research, therefore, seeks to address two primary concerns. First, it examines the identity-related challenges that Japanese high school teachers face when using English as a medium of instruction, particularly how policy demands influence these challenges, students' language abilities, cultural norms, and teachers' perceptions of their role and proficiency. Second, it examines how teachers respond to MEXT's language policy – how they adjust, make independent choices, or push back against certain expectations. Through this, the paper highlights how teachers' sense of identity and their classroom practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, the policies under which they work.

In addition, this research offers a contributive and culturally respectful perspective to understanding how language policies are interpreted and enacted in the classroom by approaching this research from a non-Japanese standpoint. Ultimately, this exploration seeks to inform professional development initiatives that support teachers in meeting both policy goals and the realities of their teaching contexts.

METHODS

To guide this investigation, the researchers employed a qualitative research design, specifically phenomenological research, to explore how Japanese English-speaking high school teachers (NNESTs) experience and interpret their professional identity and agency within the constraints of MEXT's language policy. Phenomenological studies are suitable for investigating lived experiences and the meanings individuals assign to them (Dodgson, 2023; Creswell, 2007). By focusing on subjective experience, the research design enabled the researchers to explore how participants make sense of their roles and navigate educational policies in their specific teaching contexts.

The participants were carefully selected to ensure relevance to the research's aims, focusing on understanding the attitudes of Japanese high school teachers toward the use of English as part of MEXT language policies, particularly how this influences their professional identity. Following the commitment to idiographic depth in phenomenological studies, the researchers applied three specific parameters as inclusion and exclusion criteria: demographics (prefecture), type of school, language background, and course taught by teachers (Table 1).

In particular, selecting participants from the Tokyo prefecture provides a consistent setting for data collection, as Tokyo is a central hub for policy implementation, minimizing regional disparities.

Table 1 Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria in the Selection of Participants

Parameter	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Demographics	Selected participants must be based in the Tokyo prefecture.	Participants outside the Tokyo prefecture will not be included.
Type of School	Japanese teachers in a public high school	Japanese teachers in private or other non-public high schools
Language Background	L1 Japanese English Teachers (i.e., teachers whose first language is Japanese)	Teachers whose first language is not Japanese
Course Taught by Teachers	Participants must be teaching English as a course.	Those teaching courses other than English.

Second, including only teachers from public high schools ensures that participants operate under MEXT's strict regulations, unlike private schools, which have more curricular autonomy. Public school teachers are more likely to offer insights into how national language policies influence their professional identity and classroom practices. Third, limiting participants to non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) allows for a focused examination of how MEXT's policies impact educators who learned English as an additional language, as their experiences may differ from those of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). Lastly, focusing on English language teachers keeps the research centered on those directly responsible for implementing these policies. Thus, their perspectives are essential in understanding how attitudes toward English influence professional identity and, at the same time, policy execution.

To collect rich and meaningful data, the researchers developed a set of guide questions for a semi-structured interview, a format that fosters a flexible and adaptable environment, allowing both the interviewer and interviewee to communicate freely while maintaining a degree of structure.

The questions centered on the challenges faced by Japanese high school teachers in teaching English, particularly in relation to their professional identity and the agency-reflecting strategies they employ to navigate MEXT's language policy expectations. Specifically, the first set of questions aimed to elicit participants' self-descriptions as high school English teachers in Japan, the difficulties they encounter when conducting English lessons, their students' reactions to English-only instruction, and whether MEXT's language policies support or contradict their teaching styles and beliefs. The second set of questions explored participants' understanding of MEXT's expectations for English instruction, how they balance these policies with their students' actual needs, any adjustments they make to align their teaching methods with MEXT guidelines, their approaches to professional growth within these policy constraints, and instances where they made independent decisions in implementing MEXT's English language policy in their classrooms.

The initial pool of interview questions was developed with the assistance of AI to generate a broad range of exploratory prompts based on the research's themes: teacher identity, language policy, and agency. However, these questions were not used without revision. Each item was reviewed, modified, and refined by the research team, including an educator with experience in language education and qualitative research. Changes included improving clarity, cultural appropriateness, and alignment with the phenomenological research emphasis on lived experience. The final set of questions emphasized open-ended prompts that allowed participants to share their narratives. While AI assistance helped streamline the brainstorming process, the researchers acknowledge that its suggestions could reflect dominant assumptions or generic phrasing. Therefore, human interpretation and contextualization were essential to ensure the validity and relevance of the questions. To strengthen content validity, the revised items were reviewed by an expert in language teaching and qualitative research. The feedback was used to improve wording and sequence before data collection.

Prior to the data collection, the researchers prepared a communication letter addressed to the principal of the target school and later sent it to inform them that research was to be conducted. After receiving approval, the researchers began contacting Japanese non-native English-speaking teachers to confirm their availability for an interview. Initially, ten teachers, including the principal, were contacted; however, only six (6) participated due to scheduling conflicts. Nonetheless, the number of participants interviewed remains valid, as Creswell (2007) recommended a sample size of 3 to 25 participants for qualitative research to ensure depth over breadth. Furthermore, the researchers reached saturation, as recurring data patterns were observed (Saunders et al., 2018), which falls within the acceptable threshold for qualitative interviews.

After determining the number of participants to be interviewed, formal letters were provided to both the teachers and the principal/vice-principal, outlining the research's purpose and procedures. Upon receiving approval, participating teachers were provided with a copy of the interview questions to facilitate preparation. The interviews were then scheduled at a time convenient for the participants to minimize disruptions to their responsibilities. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and was

conducted in a quiet setting to ensure a comfortable and open discussion. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy. After each interview, participants received tokens of appreciation.

Once the interviews were completed, the collected data were analyzed through a systematic process of coding and theme development. Audio recordings were transcribed using the voice memo feature of the recording device. However, the transcription was not entirely accurate because it did not clearly distinguish between the researcher/ interviewer's speech and that of the interviewees, and some parts contained errors. To ensure accuracy, the transcription was carefully reviewed and corrected by comparing it with the original recordings. Unnecessary fillers that did not add meaning were removed for clarity. The final transcripts were then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2020) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to examine the research questions. This six-phase process included: a) data familiarization, b) data coding, c) generating initial themes, d) reviewing themes, e) defining and naming themes, and f) producing the report.

The researchers carefully familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of the participants' perspectives. This process involved discussions to initially identify how teachers expressed their experiences with English, their reactions to policy expectations, and their self-perception of professional identity. Next, the researchers proceeded with a systematic coding of data by analyzing the transcripts line by line and labeling important sections with codes. Such identified codes included, but were not limited to, adjusting teaching methods, providing differentiated instruction based on students' needs, encouraging students through example, setting role model expectations versus practical teaching, promoting self-initiated learning, and implementing student-centered adaptations.

After coding, the researchers identified initial themes by grouping similar codes (e.g., Teaching Adaptations and Strategies, Balancing Exam Preparation and Communication Skills, Support for MEXT Language Policy, Decision-Making in Policy Implementation, Professional Development and Training, and Influences of Educational Goals and Students' Needs on Teaching Methods). These themes were then refined by checking them against the coded data to make sure they accurately reflected the teachers' attitudes. Some overlapping themes were combined, while others were divided into sub-themes for better clarity. The following are the refined themes: complexities of role expectations and classroom dynamics, constraints in curriculum and policy, adapting teaching strategies, implementing contextual translanguaging practices, balancing dual roles as both grammar instructors and communication facilitators, and pursuing self-directed professional development. Then, each theme was clearly defined to capture its main idea in relation to the research questions. The final themes showed how teachers' attitudes toward English shaped their professional identity and the ways they adapted despite MEXT's language policies. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a clear discussion, with examples from the transcripts added to provide depth and context.

The researchers also adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the research. First, a formal letter was sent to the principal of the school where the target participants were teaching, seeking approval for the research. Additionally, a separate letter was provided to the participants, and the researchers made every effort to explain the research purpose and objectives clearly. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were not pressured to answer any questions. The interviews were conducted in a manner that ensured participants felt comfortable and were not placed in any situation that could be perceived as incriminating. Some participants sought clarification during the interviews, engaging in discussions to better understand the questions before responding.

To ensure feasibility, only one researcher, currently based in Japan and teaching in a public school, conducted the interviews, as the other researchers were located in the Philippines. Despite this logistical limitation, the division of labor in conducting and analyzing the research was maintained equitably among all researchers. Additionally, the researchers were transparent about utilizing artificial intelligence to assist in generating the interview questions. However, human involvement was prioritized in validating and refining the content to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on a series of interviews with Japanese high school teachers who teach English, the identity-related challenges they face in using English for teaching stem from two main areas: a) complexities with role expectations and teaching approaches, and b) constraints in curriculum and policy.

One major theme that emerged was the complexity of teachers' roles in balancing authority and facilitation within diverse classroom dynamics. Some Japanese high school teachers who teach English adopt a more facilitative rather than a directive role in the classroom. Instead of giving direct instructions, they see themselves as facilitators. As P2 stated, "Teaching is not about teaching; it's about being a facilitator of a classroom." Similarly, P5 remarked, "I believe that whether students develop English skills depends on how hard they study. It doesn't depend on how well the English teacher teaches them." This perspective suggests that English proficiency is seen as more dependent on students' efforts than on teachers' instruction. Additionally, some teachers noted that their roles differ from those of native or second-language English-speaking teachers, such as Assistant

Language Teachers or Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme Participants (P3), and thus, they should not be compared based on role expectations.

Participants also highlighted struggles in their teaching approaches, shaped by their experiences and sentiments. For instance, some teachers observed that students have mixed attitudes toward learning English. P4 noted, "This year, I noticed that students don't enjoy reading, but they love speaking English," while another student told them, "Speaking is very important, and it's okay not to focus on reading." Additionally, teachers expressed that efforts to create practical communication scenarios in class often feel artificial. As P6 explained, "If I try to create that situation in class, in many cases, students don't feel it's practical. It feels forced or planned, not natural."

P4 and P6 also emphasized practical classroom challenges. P6 observed students' reactions during lessons, saying, "I watch their facial expressions. Sometimes I ask difficult questions and check their reactions." To accommodate students' needs, teachers adapt their communication strategies, often limiting their use of English in favor of simplified language and structured contexts. As P6 noted, "In many classes, I don't speak a lot of English." This statement reflects the reality that, despite teachers' efforts to encourage the use of English, students often revert to Japanese when responding. P4 supported this observation: "They might say, 'I see,' and then ask in Japanese." Another challenge is the difficulty in providing immediate corrections. As P4 shared, "I can understand what students are saying, but I can't always correct their utterances right away." Despite teachers' efforts, students often feel distant or hesitant when English is used as the primary medium of instruction (P3, P6). P3 noted, "When I speak English in class, some students feel distant," while P6 observed, "Whenever I speak in English, some students don't look at me because they don't want to be asked questions." Some students even avoid eye contact (P6) or disengage when teachers speak English (P3), indicating discomfort or reluctance to participate.

Moreover, a significant challenge teachers face is students' fear of making mistakes, particularly regarding pronunciation (P3), grammar accuracy (P1), and self-expression (P3). Teachers shared, "Many Japanese feel afraid of making mistakes and are ashamed of their pronunciation… Some students struggle to express their feelings in English." (P3) and "Students often worry about whether their sentences are correct or not." (P1). P6 further explained that many students lack confidence in speaking English due to past experiences in early education. "Many of them feel they are not good at speaking English. I think it's because they didn't have good experiences in elementary school and junior high school." This deep-seated belief in their lack of proficiency further discourages active participation. Even among those who engage, a disparity in comprehension remains. As P4 stated, "Some students can understand, but some can't," making it difficult for teachers to balance their instruction to be accessible to all students.

Grammar is another area of struggle, both in terms of students' learning and teachers' observations. Teachers noted foundational gaps in students' English learning, particularly in grammar, sentence structure, and broader language knowledge. P2 emphasized, "Japanese grammar structure is different. We have to teach them the order of subject, verb, and object," emphasizing the difficulty of teaching foreign grammar and sentence construction. Some students find grammar points challenging (P1) or feel they haven't learned enough grammar in earlier education (P3), which affects their confidence in using English. Teachers shared insights such as: "If they're under the age of five, it's much easier for us to teach them grammar." (P2), "Some grammar points can be difficult." (P1), and "Some junior high school students say they haven't learned enough grammar." (P3).

Another significant challenge lay in the misalignment between national policy expectations and practical realities in schools. MEXT emphasizes practical English use, but implementing this in Japanese schools remains difficult. As P6 stated, "MEXT's expectation is that students use English in practical situations, which is a good thing. But in Japan, it's very difficult to make that situation practical."

However, some teachers may not fully engage with or recognize MEXT policies (P2, P5, P6), either due to perceptions of impracticality or the belief that they do not apply uniformly across schools. As they expressed:

> "I don't really become conscious of MEXT policies… Maybe they have a good policy, but it doesn't apply to all schools." (P2)
> "To tell the truth, I never thought about the policies of the Ministry of Education, and I don't know much about them." (P5)
> "Frankly speaking, I don't try to understand their expectations." (P6)

Additionally, some teachers struggle to balance grammar instruction with student practice time (P1), leading to uncertainty about effective teaching strategies under policy constraints. As P1 shared, "There was a time when I was confused about the balance between teaching grammar and giving students practice time." Teachers also face time limitations and additional workloads, such as the demands of entrance exams and extracurricular activities (P4, P6), leaving little room for refining their teaching skills. As two teachers noted, "As an English teacher, I like to teach skills, but in Japan, because of the entrance exam, it is difficult for us to focus on speaking." (P4) and "Yes, I'm involved in entrance examinations and international exchange events." (P6). On the other hand, students have limited class time with their teachers, typically only two to three hours per week (P2), which restricts opportunities for meaningful interaction. P2 stated, "They have like two or three hours a week to actually face me." Additionally, teachers' workloads can sometimes

make it difficult to dedicate time to improving their teaching effectiveness. As P6 explained, “The problem is that we are so busy. I think many teachers don’t have enough time to take care of their abilities.”

While these challenges exist, some teachers acknowledge that their teaching styles do not fully align with the policy of using English as much as possible. P6 admitted, “Yes, I think my teaching style goes against the policy to use English as much as possible.” Furthermore, some teachers believe that English can be learned outside the classroom. P2 reinforced this idea: “Most of the learning happens outside the classroom,” emphasizing that formal instruction is just one part of students' language development. This perspective is encapsulated in P3’s statement, “Before students speak English, they need to learn more about history, culture, and other subjects,” implying that students must first develop knowledge in their own language before engaging with a foreign one.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, Japanese high school teachers employ a variety of agency-reflecting strategies to effectively meet the expectations set by MEXT’s language policy. These strategies include: adapting their teaching methods, implementing contextual translanguaging practices, balancing their roles as both grammar instructors and communication facilitators, and pursuing self-directed professional development.

One prominent strategy involved adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of students, align with lesson goals, and fulfill curriculum demands. Here, one key adaptation is actively monitoring students' responses, using direct questioning techniques such as: “Do you understand?” or “Are you with me?” to assess comprehension (P3). Another is the use of differentiated instruction. Teachers adjust their methods depending on whether students are enrolled in a general or specialized English course. P5 explains: “For both the English language course and the regular course, students in the English course have special lessons, like writing or speaking. In these lessons, I focus on developing their speaking and communicative skills.”

Differentiation is also seen in teachers’ focus on specific skills, such as communicative abilities, in specialized lessons. As P5 noted, “For both the English language course and the regular course, I always aim to develop their speaking skills or communication skills.” Exam preparation also plays a crucial role in shaping instructional decisions. While teachers acknowledge the importance of improving communication skills, they also recognize the weight of grammar and reading comprehension in university entrance exams. One teacher shared, “I know that students need to speak English more fluently, but to pass university entrance exams, they need to practice reading difficult questions and grammar-based tasks” (P5). Teachers balance these dual demands by structuring lessons to integrate speaking practice while ensuring students’ grammatical proficiency. As P4 put it, "I ensure questions are accessible, focusing on reading comprehension alongside listening.”

Japanese high school teachers also employed translanguaging, strategically shifting between Japanese and English to facilitate comprehension and engagement in accordance with instructional goals, lesson complexity, and student needs. For simpler concepts, teachers may use English to regularly expose students to the target language. However, Japanese is often preferred for more complex explanations. As P6 noted, “For easy things, I use English, but I mainly use Japanese for complicated things, especially when explaining grammar.” This pattern extends to technical grammatical terms. P6 explained, “I explain terms like the progressive tense in English, but clarify them in Japanese, as this helps students understand.” Other teachers also emphasized this dual-language approach. P5 explained, “I use English for simple instructions and questions, but for complicated grammar or sentences, I find it more effective to use Japanese.”

Translanguaging is used not just for clarity, but also for skill development across different areas of language learning. Some teachers use both languages in lessons to ensure students develop a well-rounded understanding of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. As P2 mentioned, “For general course students, I mix English and Japanese to help them understand better,” and stresses the importance of adapting teaching methods based on students' needs. However, teachers vary in their focus; some may emphasize reading and listening, while others prioritize speaking.

Teachers also described how they carefully balance their dual roles as grammar instructors and communication facilitators, adjusting methods based on course type and students’ proficiency levels. For general course students, some teachers place a heavier emphasis on grammar, using more Japanese for explanations to aid comprehension. As P2 explained, “For general course students, I focus more on grammatical structures and use more Japanese.” On the other hand, for foreign language students, teachers prioritize communicative competence. P2 further elaborated, “For foreign language students, I focus on English communication." P1 went even further and stated, “Within a 15-minute class, I want students to speak for at least 15 minutes.”

In addition to classroom strategies, many teachers actively engage in self-directed professional development, seeking opportunities for growth both within and outside formal educational settings. Some teachers participate in formal training programs, as P2 shared, "I've attended a couple of training sessions with the Board of Education." Others prefer self-directed learning methods. For example, P6, who regularly reads books in English, focusing on listening and speaking skills, said, “I usually try to read novels and books related to listening and speaking.” P1, taking a broader approach, read teaching materials, watched online lectures, and visited other schools to observe different teaching methods, said, “I read books about teaching methods, watch lectures on YouTube, and

sometimes visit other high schools or universities to observe other teachers." Additionally, some teachers focused on language immersion and cultural exposure. P2 shared, "I try to watch a lot of English movies," while P4 attended English conversation schools weekly and said, "I go to English conversation schools once a week.

The research findings on the challenges Japanese high school teachers face when using English for instruction offer some key takeaways for improving teaching practices and policies in the future. One important point is the need for teachers to have a clear understanding of their roles in the classroom, particularly in aligning with the expectations set by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). However, the phenomenological analysis reveals that this role clarity is more complex than simple policy alignment. When P2 reflected, "Teaching is not about teaching; it's about being a facilitator of a classroom," it highlights how teachers must continually balance the idea of being an authority figure with the expectation of guiding and supporting students more actively through learner-centered approaches. This clarity can help make teaching more effective. Previous studies have shown that when teachers are clear about what is expected of them, it improves their teaching and students' outcomes (Aoyama, 2021), which is especially important in Japan's educational system.

The research also confirms what earlier studies have found about Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs), who often feel torn between serving as language role models and striving for native-like fluency (Aoyama, 2021). P6's statement of using a teaching style that contradicts the policy (for students) to use English as much as possible reflects the dual identities of the participants as both English language models and Japanese educators. This can create some pressure on them, making it harder to be fully effective in the classroom. However, instead of viewing these challenges as signs of confusion, this research suggests that NNESTs are navigating these complexities smartly and strategically to meet their students' diverse needs. This shift from viewing teachers as struggling to seeing them as adaptable is backed by research that shows NNESTs often develop creative strategies to make things work in their unique contexts (Rubrecht, 2024).

Another key finding is that the pressure from university entrance exams has a significant impact on NNESTs' teaching. It pushes them to focus more on grammar and reading comprehension, often at the expense of communicative skills. This pressure is reflected in P5's statement on knowing both the need for students to speak English more fluently and to pass the university entrance examinations, which captures the contradictory identities of teachers as communicative facilitators and examination preparers. This matches what Allen and Tahara (2021) found in other non-native English contexts, that there is often an emphasis on exam-focused teaching. While that is necessary for academic success, it can limit broader language development, which can be problematic for students in the long run (Rubrecht, 2024). This suggests that while preparing for exams is essential, there is a need for a more balanced approach to teaching communication skills.

The research also highlights the significant amount of administrative work NNESTs are dealing with, which adds stress and affects their ability to focus on teaching. The impact of this burden extends beyond time management, as revealed in P6's reflection on the limited time of teachers. The statement reflects the subtle diminishing of the participants' professional identity caused by their institutional demands. This contributes to the body of research that examines how administrative tasks can overwhelm teachers and hinder their ability to manage their classrooms effectively (Nath & Pandey, 2025). While the teachers in this research were clearly dedicated, the findings suggest that reducing administrative duties would enable them to focus more on what matters: teaching.

In terms of teaching methods, the research stresses the value of active learning and culturally relevant approaches, which become evident in the teachers' translanguaging practices. P6's statement of using English for easy content and Japanese for more complicated lesson parts suggests the practice of attending to students' needs by choosing a language they perceive as comfortable and supportive. This aligns with the work of Albertson (2020), who argues that incorporating cultural context helps engage students and enhance their learning. This shift moves away from a one-size-fits-all method, recognizing that language education works best when it is connected to the local context. Additionally, integrating students' first language (L1), especially Japanese (Nihongo), into English lessons is a great way to enhance comprehension and alleviate anxiety while respecting students' cultural identities. This approach creates a more inclusive and effective classroom environment, as noted by Mohammed (2020).

The research also reinforces the need for professional development for NNESTs, a theme that frequently emerges in research on improving teaching effectiveness through ongoing training. P1's commitment to reading books about teaching methods or watching lectures on YouTube represents an image where educators pursue growth not just from external mandates, but from a genuine desire to bridge the gap between their current and envisioned professional identity. Offering NNESTs opportunities for professional growth, such as training programs and immersive language experiences, is crucial in helping them overcome challenges and improve their teaching skills.

All in all, this research contributes to the growing research on NNESTs by demonstrating the interconnectedness of role expectations, teaching strategies, and institutional pressures. The findings suggest that, while NNESTs do face challenges, they are far from passive. The participants may be

considered as adaptive and thoughtful professionals influenced by the complex and conflicting demands of their role. Through experience and reflection, they actively adapt their teaching to meet the needs of their students and the demands of the education system. The research also supports research indicating that professional development, role clarity, and culturally relevant teaching are all crucial to enhancing the quality of English language education in Japan, providing valuable insights for policymakers and educators.

CONCLUSIONS

In response to the first research question on the challenges faced by Japanese high school NNESTs in using English for teaching, this research found that teachers navigate pressures related to high language proficiency expectations, test-focused instruction due to university entrance exams, and administrative demands that constrain instructional time. Given these findings, it may be inferred that national language policies could benefit from greater alignment with the lived teaching conditions in Japanese schools. Recognizing these institutional and pedagogical dynamics is crucial for understanding how policy is implemented on the ground and for identifying areas where additional support may be beneficial.

As for the second question on agency-reflecting strategies, the findings suggest that teachers demonstrate a capacity for thoughtful adaptation, strategically alternating between English and Japanese, modifying their roles according to student needs, and integrating culturally attuned practices. These observations suggest that rather than simply responding to top-down directives, NNESTs in Japan exercise informed agency as they negotiate between policy expectations and classroom realities. Such adaptations can be seen as context-responsive enactments that contribute meaningfully to language learning outcomes.

From these insights, several implications arise. Policy frameworks may allow more pedagogical flexibility, considering the nuanced decision-making required in classroom practice. The multifaceted responsibilities of NNESTs as educators and institutional members may be better supported by reducing administrative workloads and clarifying their roles. Ongoing professional development, including subsidized language training and instructional workshops, can equip teachers with tools aligned with evolving policy goals. These opportunities should be institutionally supported rather than left to individual initiative. Given the lengthy timelines for policy implementation in Japan, incorporating teacher perspectives into the design and review of language policies can enhance their relevance and sustainability.

The research focused on a small group of educators from a public high school in Tokyo, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of teachers in other prefectures or school contexts. Future research may explore comparative perspectives among language teachers from different prefectures, school types, or educational levels. Also, longitudinal studies may contribute by examining how language teacher identity and agency evolve over time in response to shifting policy implementations.

The researchers conducted this research within the Japanese educational context, recognizing their distinct positionality as external observers. They approached the inquiry with reflexivity and respect, aware of the cultural and contextual distance that may shape and limit their interpretations. The insights offered aim to highlight the value of teacher agency and context-sensitive policy design in enhancing English language education. This paper offers an informed perspective on the ongoing discussions in Japanese language policies, English education studies, and professional teacher development. Recognizing and supporting the adaptive practices of NNESTs can contribute to more effective and locally resonant educational outcomes.

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