Co-production of professional identities through self-study: Cases of foreign language teacher educators

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Cette étude a pour objectif de co-construire des identités professionnelles parmi les formateurs·trices d'enseignant·es de langues étrangères au Japon à travers l'auto-apprentissage collaboratif. Nous reconnaissons qu'il n'existe pas de parcours professionnel standardisé pour les formateurs·trices d'enseignant·es, la recherche souligne l'importance de s'engager dans des pratiques réflexives aux côtés de collègues qui sont à différentes phases dans leur carrière. La collaboration au sein d'un tel groupe de formateurs·trices d'enseignant·es est très utile, car elle leur permet de donner un sens à leurs perspectives et à leurs interprétations, en positionnant leurs propres phases de carrière par rapport à celles des autres. L'étude souligne que si la réflexion individuelle est possible, le processus partagé au sein d'une communauté conduit à des connaissances plus approfondies et à une croissance mutuelle. En examinant les tensions et les dilemmes auxquels sont confrontés les formateurs·trices d'enseignant·es novices et expérimenté·es, cette recherche démontre comment l'auto-apprentissage collaboratif facilite la négociation des identités professionnelles et l'amélioration des pratiques d'enseignement.

Mots-clés:
auto-apprentissage collaboratif, formateurs d'enseignants, identités professionnelles, réflexion, réflexivité.

Keywords:
collaborative self-study, teacher educators, professional identities, reflection, reflexivity.

1. Introduction

The professional learning of teachers, particularly the development of their identities, has been the subject of numerous earlier studies in teacher education. However, the studies about the paths of professional development of teacher educators have not received much attention (Brody & Hadar 2011). Teacher educators' research examines often the relations between practising teachers' approaches to teaching and how their students learn. Even though researchers are an essential part of research in such studies (Watanabe 2022), they do not often turn what Berger (2015: 220) describes as "the researcher lens" to

themselves, that is, to examine their own positionalities in the study as researchers. Further, turning the researcher lens to themselves as teacher educators is even less common, thus leaving exploration on becoming and being teacher educators under-researched. This scarcity of research can be problematic, as, according to Trent (2013), becoming a teacher educator has proven to be difficult due to diverse conflicts and tensions, pertinent to their roles. For teacher educators, creating professional identities can also be a challenge; Kubanyiova (2009), for instance, claims that teachers frequently experience dissonance between their ideal and actual selves.

In the Japanese context, one can become a foreign language teacher educator without any specific qualifications, and usually no training is provided (Takeda 2012) regardless of the target languages. Furthermore, Asaoka's narrative study of foreign language teacher educators (2022) illustrates that while teacher educators use their identities as learners and teachers to "deconstruct" and "reconstruct" who they are, there is no one uniform path that they follow to become teacher educators. It also indicates that many teacher educators have been on a solitary journey without a space to discuss their feelings and experiences and to negotiate their identities as teacher educators to become active participants in their social and professional networks. The current study was inspired by such concerns of teacher educators who wanted to establish a professional network and foster a community of practice for their own professional growth.

With the use of collaborative reflective sessions, the current study delves into how the authors, teacher educators of foreign languages in Japan, co-constructed their professional identities, in particular, focusing on the tensions and dilemmas inherent in being "novice" and "more experienced" teacher educators, and how and why they became able (or remained unable) to deal with them in educating student teachers. In addition, it explores how sharing experiences and feelings in co-productive research among teacher educators of different foreign languages with varied career phases brought them to gain different perspectives and interpretations which led to facilitate reflectivity and reflexivity.[1]

[1] Reflectivity is the ability to critically examine one’s practices, beliefs, and assumptions to enhance classroom teaching. It often involves examination of evidence-based classroom data and dialogic interaction with others for the purpose of the development (Mann & Walsh, 2017). Reflexivity goes further, requiring researchers to actively examine how their identity, biases, and experiences shape the research process and outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bass et al., 2002). It is a dynamic, interactive process where researchers acknowledge their influence and adjust their approach in the research.

2. Literature review

Although the importance of reflection and reflective practice in continuous professional development is frequently noted in the literature (Schön 1983, 1987; Watanabe 2017; Farrell 2019), not much attention has been paid to how teacher educators reflect on their own practice and how it affects the construction of their professional identities (Williams & Ritter 2010). Without enough opportunities to engage in continuous conversations about teaching with colleagues, implicit theories and hidden beliefs may have a greater influence on teacher educators' practices than their conscious cognitive reasoning (Louie et al. 2003).

One way to improve teacher educators' practices is through self-study (Loughran & Russell 2002). Self-study is a mode of research in which teachers investigate their own beliefs and teaching behaviours within the context of their work as educators (Whitehead 1993). It allows teachers to increase their understanding of themselves as a teacher and as a learner as well as of the development of professional expertise (Loughran 2004). Louie et al. (2003) also argue that educators can produce a tangible output from their own teaching context through self-study research: teaching expertise that they can share with their colleagues.

Still, there are certain difficulties with self-study research for teacher educators. The conflict that arises from playing the dual roles of researcher and teacher educator at the same time may make some teacher educators reluctant to confront it. The greatest level of tension arises, for instance, when they find that their methods as teacher educators do not conform to the values they claim to support as researchers. Thus, Louie et al. (2003: 159) assert that self-study requires "willingness to reveal and confront self" and also trusted colleagues. In fact, Samaras (2011: 75) argues that having and being critical friends is an essential aspect in self-study research and their role in critical collaborative inquiry is to "participate in open, honest, and constructive feedback."

Teacher educators can learn from a research group with reliable, supportive, and critical peers and work together on self-study projects. Influenced by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development, many researchers in a teacher development context have argued that the role of others is essential in the learning process of teachers (Freeman & Johnson 1998; Shulman & Shulman 2004; Johnson 2009). Teachers' professional knowledge is effectively shaped by collaborative conversations with other members of the learning community, especially those who possess more expertise (Johnson 2009). This, in turn, influences teachers' classroom behaviours and ways of thinking.

Berry & Loughran (2002) assert that one of the benefits of collaborative self-study research is to develop a new understanding of teaching, one which is less likely to emerge through reflection done individually. Reflecting together on how

they teach and what they are thinking while teaching pushes "beyond what is normally 'good enough' in a teaching situation but which is (for us) just too superficial" (Berry & Loughran 2002: 17). Bass et al. (2002: 59) also argue that working with critical friends helped make subtle and yet significant shifts visible and "pushed reflection to reflexivity." In a sense, a self-study group of teacher educators becomes a legitimate place to examine their teaching practices, values, and beliefs in relation to their own teaching.

This study is positioned within the broader discourse on teacher educators' reflective practice and the role of self-study in professional identity development. While previous research has underscored the significance of reflection in professional growth (Schön 1983, 1987; Farrell 2019), less attention has been devoted to the specific ways teacher educators engage in self-reflection and how this process informs their evolving professional identities (Williams & Ritter 2010). By building on the work of Louie et al. (2003) and Berry & Loughran (2002), this study contributes to the discussion by emphasising the importance of collaborative self-study as a means of deepening reflection, making implicit beliefs explicit, and exploring professional identities through reciprocal interactions with others. Furthermore, drawing on sociocultural perspectives (Freeman & Johnson 1998; Johnson 2009), it highlights the value of engaging with critical friends in structured learning communities to enhance the effectiveness of self-study. In doing so, this research not only reinforces the idea that teacher educators benefit from structured, dialogic reflection but also extends the literature by exploring how collaborative self-study can serve as a powerful tool for bridging the gap between research and practice in teacher education.

3. Context

3.1 Context of the study

In this section, we discuss the socio-cultural context in which the study was conducted. To this end, we first provide an overview of initial teacher education (ITE hereafter) programmes and teacher educators in Japan.

The ITE programmes in tertiary institutions are accredited based on the core curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2017. Implemented in 2019, this curriculum covers teaching methodologies, linguistics, literature, cross-cultural understanding, and required English proficiency. To qualify as a language teacher, students must complete an ITE programme at the undergraduate level, including two to three weeks of practicum, and pass recruitment exams conducted by municipalities or private institutions.

As was already mentioned, teacher educators are not required to meet any particular standards or have any professional training (Takeda 2012). Moreover, they typically do not have the chance to reflect on their own methods of

instruction. As a result, they often use their identities as learners to both deconstruct and reconstruct the identities of teacher educators (Asaoka 2022).

In the academic years of 2022 and 2023, three teacher educators engaged in this collaborative self-study: Chitose, an experienced teacher educator for pre-service teachers of English from University A; Atsuko, a novice teacher educator for pre-service teachers of English from University B; and Kimiko, an experienced teacher educator for pre-service teachers of French from University A. As the authors of this paper are Chitose and Atsuko, discussion in the paper is based on the analysis and the interpretation of the data by two of us, although we occasionally refer to Kimiko's data to supplement the discussion.

Atsuko teaches in the ITE programme at a private university situated in the suburbs of Tokyo. She earned a Ph.D. on the topic of reflective practice. After spending approximately 20 years teaching English for Academic Purposes at another university, and in 2017 she relocated to her current workplace. She felt like a novice or a peripheral participant in the field of teacher education, despite having been teaching at postsecondary institutions for 30 years. She had never taught at a Japanese pre-tertiary institution, and because of her US undergraduate degree, she lacked a pre-tertiary-level teaching certificate. Furthermore, unlike her students, she did not necessarily aspire to become a secondary school teacher and lacked a precise image of what is an ideal teacher at the pre-tertiary educational level. Thus, prior to the project, she often felt a sense of uneasiness about teaching in the ITE programme.

Conversely, Chitose spent almost 25 years as a teacher educator in the ITE programme at a private institution close to Tokyo. Even though she taught methodology courses alongside three colleagues, she felt more of a peripheral participant in professional and social networks prior to the current project than a full member. This is due to the limited opportunities she had to discuss both the content and methods of her teaching with her colleagues, as reflective practice is not common within her institution.

Kimiko spent nearly 25 years as a teacher educator in the French language teacher training program at the same institution as Chitose. Before engaging in the self-study project with Chitose and Atsuko, she had not participated in any collaborative or reflective teacher educator communities, despite her experience in leading in-service professional development programmes. As the sole French teacher educator at her institution, she had limited opportunities to share her teaching practices with colleagues.

Our collaboration was intentionally designed to include teacher educators working with pre-service teachers across different languages and representing a range of teaching experiences and educational contexts. At the onset of the study, Chitose and Atsuko had been friends and worked on a few research

projects. Chitose and Kimiko had been colleagues at University A for approximately twenty years, being in charge of different ITE programmes.

3.2 Methodology

We employed a collaborative self-study approach to explore and respond to the following research questions:

> 1. What type of tensions and dilemmas were inherent in being "novice" and "more experienced" teacher educators, and how and why we became able (or remained unable) to deal with the tensions and dilemmas that we had to face while educating student teachers?
>
> 2. How does critical, collaborative reflection help us negotiate our professional identities?

The methods employed for data collection were online collaborative reflective sessions (CRSs hereafter) via Zoom and online individual journal writing on Google Doc. The main data analysed for the current study comprised discussions from eleven CRSs over two years held between May 2022 and March 2024 (Table 1).

	Year 1	Year 2
1st CRS	27 May 2022	21 April 2023
2nd CRS	24 June 2022	4 June 2023
3rd CRS	22 July 2022	11 August 2023
4th CRS	4 November 2022	6 November 2023
5th CRS	23 December 2022	31 January 2024
6th CRS	N/A	27 March 2024

Table 1: Schedule of collaborative reflective sessions

In the sessions, each of us shared a narrative based on the journal entry and the others asked questions and offered interpretations from their perspectives. Each member's narratives lasted about 30 minutes, and through the interactions among the members, they often evolved to be group narratives. The CRSs were conducted in Japanese and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. We outsourced the transcription of the video recordings from the CRSs to a professional company, which performed an intelligent transcription, refining the text by omitting fillers and errors while preserving the original meaning. In our journal writing, we recorded our reactions and feedback on teaching methods courses and conducting self-study research in Japanese. The topics, durations, and entry lengths were left to our discretion. The segments from CRSs and journal entries referred to in this paper were translated by the authors. By using narratives as a tool for reflexivity, we were able to critically examine our evolving identities as teacher educators and the ways our backgrounds and experiences

shaped our perspectives. Engaging in this reflective and reflexive process through personal storytelling allowed us to uncover implicit assumptions, biases, and emotions that influenced our teaching practices. Moreover, as both authors and participants in this study, we played an active role in constructing and interpreting our narratives, reinforcing the reflective and dynamic nature of reflexivity in self-study research.

We employed thematic analysis, beginning with individual open coding, where each researcher independently identified key concepts within all the transcribed data. This process then evolved into a collaborative effort in which we systematically assessed, compared, and refined emerging themes. Through multiple rounds of discussion and modification, we identified common patterns and overarching themes which were drawn from the data: "how to respond to student teachers' microteaching" and "how we should ask student teachers to give and exchange peer feedback."

4. Findings

In this section, we seek to respond to the research questions stated above. In the subsection of unpacking dilemmas, we present the dilemmas we each faced in our own phases of our teacher educator paths. The subsequent subsection of negotiating new professional identities corresponds to the second research question, and we illustrate our paths of how we negotiated our professional identities in the critical and collaborative reflection group.

4.1 Unpacking dilemmas

The following subsections present individual analytical short texts, each focusing on one participant.

Atsuko: Through the discussions in CRSs, I became aware that my dilemma lies in constructing a professional identity as a teacher educator. Through the discussions and comments in the faculty meetings and casual interactions with colleagues at my university, I gathered what student teachers are expected to be: being well mannered and organised as well as being equipped with subject and pedagogical knowledge of teaching of English. I also learned that teacher educators are expected to foster such students to prepare them to be accommodating to participate in school-based teaching practicum. Even though fostering such students diverted from my ideal image of a teacher educator, one who allows students to develop grounded in their own strengths, I felt I needed to develop an identity to accord with what is expected of teacher educators at the university in Japan. As Lave & Wenger (1991) point out, my identity construction shows how identity is socially constructed and how individuals engage in a community of practice where they take on roles, learn the norms and gradually move from peripheral to full participation.

One instance of a dilemma can be observed from my sense of having to be firm with the students. I expressed my view in the second CRS in Year 1, "I feel that I have to be strict to students, especially those who are enrolled in teacher certificate courses." Being strict here mostly refers to giving them instructions on good habits and manners, such as meeting deadlines and using polite language, rather than issues directly relevant to teaching English, like becoming more fluent in the language or acquiring teaching techniques. I felt it was my role or duty to be firm with student teachers, as the following quote illustrates: "Whether I like it or not, I feel like I have to be strict with the students by telling them, 'You are going to be a teacher, and this is what is expected in your field'" (2nd CRS Year 1). As described above, I felt obligated to adopt the common and expected attitude at the university.

Among various dilemmas in constructing a teacher educator identity, one that preoccupied me the most was one common topic during the CRSs amongst the three of us, "how to give comments on student teachers' microteaching." I did not know and was not confident enough about the comments I can or should make to their microteaching. Yet, I knew that I would like to be able to give comments which would draw out their own answers from within themselves rather than giving explicit and direct comments. The former can be illustrated as facilitating the growth of their own knowledge about teaching (Berry 2007) by challenging their thinking (William & Ritter 2010), while the latter, telling them how to teach (William & Ritter 2010) by providing a simple and quick recipe of teaching. The former aligns with my teaching philosophy as I believe that every teacher has a unique style and, thus, has different solutions for their development of teaching. Yet, I did not know how to give such comments; in fact, I did not even know how to give simple and practical comments on teaching tips. Despite my ongoing challenge of commenting on student teachers' microteaching, the discussion in CRSs allowed me to unpack and discuss the dissonance of teacher educator identity construction.

Chitose: Owing to the collaboration with Atsuko and Kimiko, early on in the project, I became able to unpack a dilemma by realising that my approaches to instructing student teachers—especially providing them feedback—were not necessarily the most effective. I frequently functioned as an expert and a "provider of knowledge" (Williams & Ritter 2010: 87), telling them that they "should do this" or "shouldn't do that", as if that was the only solution to improve their practice, though I would have preferred to give them time to think through their options, my ideal self (Kubanyivoa 2009) as a teacher educator.

As Berry points out (2007), one of the tensions faced by teacher educators is a balance between providing explicit comments and empowering student teachers to find their own solutions, a challenge I personally encountered in the current project. As the following excerpt illustrates, I first noticed that my own experience as a language teacher led me to determine the teaching point that

needs to be improved about their microteaching, and I delivered it to the student teachers explicitly, without waiting for them to grasp it:

> I noticed I often give feedback on teaching tips and techniques explicitly. ... When teachers introduce a new topic, they are expected to elicit ideas from their students, especially about what they already know, right? But (in microteaching) the student teachers instead told them what they researched in advance. ... I wanted them to notice this problem by themselves, but it turned out I was the one who gave explicit feedback and told them not to do this. (1st CRS Year 1)

Through the first CRS, I decided to give student teachers just hints and let them figure out solutions by themselves, but it somehow did not go very well. One student teacher, for instance, demonstrated a strong conviction that grammar lessons need to be given in the students' native tongue, Japanese. This was one of the issues I frequently encountered with many student teachers. Feeling frustrated, at the end of the class I explicitly stated my own opinion, using the students' native tongue might be a useful tool for teaching grammar but it also depends on the objectives and needs of the students' learning. Then, the student teacher in particular took this idea and wrote it as a solution in his post-class reflection. I noticed then that he was waiting for an explicit answer from me. As Williams & Ritter (2010: 87) argue, explicit answers from teacher educators may provide student teachers with "some degree of comfort and reassurance" while that would give me the satisfaction of doing what I thought was my job as a teacher educator. This case showed I still struggled in how I should give feedback appropriately and my professional identity as a teacher educator was wavering, trying to decide the right balance between explicit instruction and elicitation from student teachers. I recognised myself as what Loughran would call a "living contradiction" (2007: 16). During the second CRS, Atsuko stated that expressing my frustration with student teachers was totally acceptable, as "I want them to understand that this is a place to practise teaching methods that they have never been taught before" (2nd CRS Year 1). As an experienced teacher educator, on the other hand, Kimiko used a metaphor of putting on a mask and stated her idea that we teacher educators should put on an appropriate mask that best suits our purposes and needs, and not let our emotions control us. I was relieved to be able to discuss my feelings with them and discover different viewpoints, although the question of how best to provide feedback remained unanswered.

4.2 Negotiating new professional identities

Atsuko: Throughout the discussions in CRSs, I sought to make meaning of my dilemma of being unable to give comments to student teachers' microteaching by contrasting it with the experiences of the other members who are more experienced teacher educators. The comparison between Chitose and myself in giving comments to student teachers' microteaching emerged in our first CRS, which made me realise that teacher educators may face different challenges depending on their professional situation as teacher educators. I shared my

dilemma in teaching, which was not knowing what comments to make to student teachers' microteaching. Chitose then shared her dilemma in making comments to student teachers' microteaching, which was that she was wondering if she should abstain from making any comments at all and let them find out their own answers.

Hearing her dilemma, which was the opposite of my own, I declared: "That is what I am aiming at." I then mentioned the idea of *shuhari*: "Someone with an extensive experience as you has a different dilemma, it is like *shuhari* in kendo." *Shuhari* refers to different phases of learning in Japanese martial arts. According to Komori (2019), *shu* means to "follow" and represents a stage where a practitioner follows the teaching established in the field and learns the patterns and techniques, or the basics. *Ha*, meaning "break", is a phase where a practitioner develops one's ideas and skills through exploring approaches from an alternative style or a different teacher and incorporates what is beneficial. Then, *ri*, "separation," is the final stage where the practitioner becomes autonomous as one has generated a new understanding of the art through oneself. Referring to *shuhari*, I learned that there are different concerns and dilemmas in different phases of teacher educators, and that even though I would like to implement Chitose's idea of not making comments and letting the student teachers figure out the answers on their own, I did not think I was quite ready to do so because of my lack of experience.

To validate my goal as a teacher educator, I compared myself to Teacher A, a colleague in my university. We co-led a session where our student teachers presented online microteaching. After the microteaching, Teacher A gave helpful tips to student teachers in teaching grammar such as how group nouns can be introduced in a lesson. Although my ideal role would not emphasise providing explicit tips, team-teaching made me realise I aspire to offer similar guidance, as I currently cannot give comments as effectively as Teacher A. I shared this in the fifth CRS (Year 1), expressing that I see her as a realistic role model to emulate before further developing professionally.

In the second year of our study, I was still in a dilemma of giving comments to student teachers' microteaching; however, I came to understand my preoccupation with giving comments by associating it to playing the role of a teacher. In the fifth CRS (Year 2), I realised that my focus on giving feedback was more about fulfilling my role as a teacher educator and avoiding appearing incompetent, rather than truly improving student teachers' teaching. This insight came from Kimiko's observation that commenting often felt more like a duty than offering genuine help to student teachers.

I am still negotiating my professional identity as a teacher educator, but the opportunity to discuss my views about my professional identity allowed me to become reflective and reflexive on my challenges. The arena for discussion also allowed me to explore the path of a teacher educator, as evidenced by the

dissonance between the teacher educator I feel I "ought to" be (Kubanyiova 2009), in line with expectations from the university, and the teacher educator I aspire to be, in line with my teaching philosophy.

Being in the group with teachers at different phases of their career as teacher educators also allowed me to gain a reflexive insight into my dissonances as a teacher educator. I was preoccupied with giving comments to student teachers' microteaching, but hearing stories from Chitose and Kimiko who were trying NOT to give direct, explicit comments, I became able to position myself as being in the early phase of a teacher educator. Hearing their stories, I mentioned:

> I realised that teacher educators with longer years of experience think differently from me. Without your stories, I would not have been able to learn those differences or observe teacher educators' developmental trajectories. (3rd CRS Year 1)

Moreover, though I have not yet reached the image of my ideal teacher educator self (Kubanyiova 2009), I am hopeful that I will be able to become such through learning from and following the professional trajectory of Chitose and Kimiko, as the following quote delineates: "One of these days, I will be in the phase where you are now. Being able to see myself in relation to you two was very interesting" (6th CRS Year 2). This means our collaborative group offered "an important imagined future dimension that transcends direct experience" and functioned as "an incentive for development and change" (Kubanyiova 2009: 315). I was able to envision a developmental path as a teacher educator, which I can follow through discussions with teacher educators at different phases.

Chitose: In my collaborative professional development, which I pursued through CRSs, I continued to be faced with challenges. As an example, a critical incident occurred in Year 1 when I was reflecting on the course evaluation from the spring semester in my methodology class. I noticed one student teacher stated that my feedback was rather sketchy and it was difficult to understand how their microteaching was evaluated. I had not previously received such unfavourable course evaluations, and because of the current project, I felt it was necessary to deal with this issue to accommodate the comment from the student teacher. In the first class of the fall semester, I gave the student teachers a detailed explanation of the evaluation criteria, and in order to validate my feedback, I mentioned that I had professionally witnessed many classroom scenarios in pre-tertiary-institutions; therefore, my comments were primarily based on the professional knowledge I had gained from these observations. This in fact influenced me to give more specific and direct feedback after their microteaching, in a way remaining "the 'provider' of knowledge" rather than "the 'provoker' of learning" (Williams & Ritter 2010: 87). This again was in dissonance with what I had decided to do in the first CRS. However, as a part of the project, when I interviewed one teacher educator of Japanese as a foreign language, she showed a very strong belief that she would not give explicit feedback herself; but rather, she tried to pick out the important points from what

student teachers were discussing and asked them, "What do you think?" rather than her explaining what they should do to improve their teaching. Her comment left a strong impression on me, and I started to think once again that it is important to make them aware of their issues rather than just directly stating them myself–a shift to the provoker of learning.

Atsuko and Kimiko were supportive and accepted my critical predicament when I told them about it during the third CRS in Year 1. For example, Atsuko stated that since it can be caused by a difference in values, it might be a good idea to be more proactive in expressing our approach to evaluation. Kimiko further stated that many of her student teachers also want comments from her in the form of what they "should" do; but we need to extract answers from them, while they need to think in order to develop their understanding about teaching. Through dialogue with them, I re-realised that there may be a "difference in values" between student teachers and us, and that the student teachers are reluctant to make mistakes and tend to think in terms of what they "should" do; instead, we need to answer with what they "can" do, giving them options and decisions, and they are the ones who make the decisions. There may also have been some relief that the two colleagues sympathised with my dilemma. As Berry & Loughran (2002) rightly put, we taught each other about teaching while also assisting our student teachers in their learning, and a collaborative self-study based on mutual trust helped both the teacher educators —us—, as well as the student teachers to progress. Not only that, taking part in the project forced me to go beyond reflection and more toward reflexivity, as the following story delineates.

Based on the discussion in Year 1, at the start of my methodology course in Year 2, I informed a new group of student teachers that I could only offer them options as feedback and that it was up to them to consider their options. As the semester progressed, I tried to let them figure out their own solutions as much as possible. For example, they often discussed and made inquiries about how to balance utilising Japanese, the first language, with English, the second and target language, when giving students instructions and explanations. I used to feel frustrated when they stated their students would not understand what they said if they did not use Japanese, while now I became able to ask questions such as "What do you think about the balance?" or "How did it go when you used Japanese?" without telling them my ideas explicitly. Another change I made was to assign them to write their comments on microteaching on Google Forms after class, inspired by how Atsuko assigns her student teachers to give peer feedback. This enabled me to read their comments carefully and to see that in fact their comments were appropriate and constructive in many cases. Furthermore, I felt relieved that my comment that I wrote on Google Forms looked like just one of many. Being asked by Atsuko to elaborate on the reason for this (4th CRS Year 2), I was able to confirm my belief that, instead of believing

that my feedback is the best one, I would want for them to believe that it was only one of several possibilities. Interestingly, what became clear then was the gap between Atsuko and me; as Atsuko mentioned this earlier, as a novice teacher educator, she felt that she had to learn and show her student teachers that she can make comments adequately first, even if she did not particularly enjoy doing it.

What I realised through this collaborative project is that through dialogue with honest and trusting colleagues, even as an experienced teacher educator, I may still gain new perspectives and new insights for improvement in teaching, and that by actually trying them out in class, new challenges may arise. In the final CRS in Year 2, I summarised my two-year journey toward professional development as follows, explaining how I found one of the roles of teacher educators to be a guide that sows the seeds of "awareness":

> What I thought this time was that maybe my role was to act as a guide. Provide students with options and clues and allow them to make their own decisions rather than merely directing them. I came to understand that I need to provide them with guidance and options that are suitable for each circumstance, rather than merely letting them figure out their own solutions.

5. Discussion

When conducting a co-productive approach which requires a continuous bidirectional discussion and negotiation with research participants, researchers need a high degree of reflexivity and an openness to new and alternative viewpoints (Grasz et al. 2020). As critical collaboration with others is one essential element of the success of self-study research (Samaras 2011), in the present study as well, it turned out to be a key element that helped us, taking dual roles of researchers and participants, negotiate our professional identities. This may be summarised in three ways as follows: moving beyond technical advice, noticing different perspectives due to career phases, and having an open and safe space.

5.1 Moving beyond technical advice

Continuing to reflect on one's teaching practice with the help of two colleagues allowed us to become more reflective, rather than simply giving and taking technical advice from them. Dialogue with others facilitated our understanding of what is happening in the situation, something which we were not aware of before, which impacted our perceptions of teaching practice. In Chitose's case, for instance, understanding that we all have varied values in teaching, even student teachers, enabled her to ask referential questions (ex. "What do you think?") to her student teachers, rather than giving explicit feedback. She also adjusted how student teachers provide peer feedback to each microteaching (ex. by posting comments on Google Forms after class) and tried to read their written responses more thoroughly before delivering her own feedback to them.

By changing her teaching approaches, she was able to discover that much of the comments made by peers were in fact helpful and constructive. Furthermore, Kimiko's frequent use of metaphors (ex. putting on a mask) also assisted us in discovering new meanings of the challenges by objectifying them and understanding them from a different perspective.

5.2 Noticing different perspectives due to career phases

Not just as an equal colleague in the learning community, disparities in our teaching experience as teacher educators further allowed us to be reflexive and to identify new and diverse interpretations. For instance, one of the themes that continued to emerge during the CRSs was how we should provide comments to student teachers' microteaching. While Chitose discussed her dilemma of not providing direct feedback but allowing them to notice their own solutions, Atsuko discussed her opposing view as a novice teacher educator; while she recognised the importance of allowing them to "notice their own challenges in teaching rather than giving explicit comments" (Section 4.2), she interpreted it as a quality that teacher educators with more experience can possess. As a beginner teacher educator, in contrast, she should emphasise learning to make direct remarks since she was not yet secure in making direct or logical judgments at the right time. She further described this as the dissonance between being an "ought-to" teacher educator and an "ideal" one, and the CRSs enabled her to realise that she is able to "trace the trajectory of Chitose and Kimiko" (Section 4.2). Although there is no set model path for becoming a teacher educator, dialogue with teacher educators that are in other career phases allowed Atsuko to envision a teacher educator path for her to pursue.

By contrasting different perspectives on delivering feedback to student teachers, we discovered that these perspectives were in fact influenced by different career stages, and that there are challenges unique to novice teacher educators. This suggests that not only were our teaching environments different, but also that our teaching experience levels differed, which helped us to re-examine and reconstruct our professional identities.

5.3 An open and safe space and acknowledgement by others

Finally, as Atsuko stated earlier in Section 4.2, the community provided us with a secure and comfortable environment in which we could share our experiences and views while exploring our professional identities. Validation by other members has helped us continue to negotiate our professional identities. For instance, Chitose's story in Section 4.1 shows that her identity reconstruction was elusive, trying to decide the balance between a knowledge provider and a learning provoker, which she noticed after joining the current project. Responding to her story, Atsuko's acknowledgement, as well as Kimiko's metaphor of "putting on a mask", rephrasing and objectifying the situation, undoubtedly helped Chitose feel "relieved" about her struggle, not to mention

giving her a new understanding of her difficult situation. In Atsuko's case as well, her story in Section 4.2 shows having a space to share her insecurity of not knowing how to give comments to student teachers' microteaching provided her with an opportunity to vent and to learn from the other members.

These findings are consistent with Hatton & Smith's assertion (1995) that to foster reflectivity, the connection with other members of the community must be a safe space for self-disclosure where risk-taking is acceptable. Teachers' identity reconstruction may be challenging and unsteady; therefore, members should feel comfortable and secure in being open. Moreover, being acknowledged by other members helps them move forward in their professional development.

The question is, how did we become trusted colleagues in such a short period of time? This is an issue worth investigating further; as Asaoka et al. (2020) argue, interactions with those who share little mutual interest, such as working in a different workplace, can make collaborative professional development much easier. The three of us—Chitose, Atsuko, and Kimiko—come from diverse teaching backgrounds and have varying levels of experience, each working in a different ITE program. This diversity may have played a crucial role in fostering a sense of safety and comfort within our group, as it allowed us to engage as critical friends (Samaras 2011) and approach discussions with openness, respect, and an appreciation for different perspectives. It was also perhaps due to the long-term friendship outside of the research between Chitose and Atsuko, as well as Atsuko's long enough teaching experiences as a language teacher even though her rather short-time experience of teaching in ITE as compared to Chitose.

6. Conclusion

Participation in the collaborative and reflective community drove us towards full participants in the professional community surrounding teacher education, transitioning from peripheral members. During the collaborative sessions, we became more reflective about our own teaching practices and more reflexive about our professional identities in the comfortable and secure community.

Teacher educators' collaborative self-study serves as a vital mechanism for fostering reflection on their teaching practices and encouraging reflexivity concerning their positions and career phases. Through this process, teacher educators can critically assess and enhance their instructional methods, leading to continuous development. As a result, these enhancements not only strengthen teacher educators' own practices but also benefit student teachers, equipping them with more effective teaching strategies and a deeper understanding of their professional development.

There is no single path for teacher educators, meaning that a standardised model path does not exist. However, engaging in collaborative self-study with other teacher educators at different career phases can be particularly beneficial, especially for novice teacher educators. Through this collaborative process, they can envision future career phases and develop the perspective that, even if they cannot achieve certain goals now, they can attain them in the future. While deconstructing and reconstructing practices can be done individually, doing so within a community amplifies the positive impact, as co-production fosters mutual growth and learning.

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