

# The Professional Development of Limited-Term Contract Teachers at Japanese Universities

Marian Wang

Center for Education in General Studies, Konan University  
8-9-1 Okamoto, Higashinada-ku, Kobe, 658-8501 Japan

## Abstract

Limited-term contract positions at Japanese universities have been on the rise since the mid-1990s, whereas tenured positions have been in decline (Talbot & Mercer, 2018). Limited-term contract positions for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers vary in what they offer teachers regarding the duration of the contract, the amount of research and other budgets, salary, bonuses, time commitment on campus, number of classes to teach in a week, and extra duties outside of the classroom. EFL teachers who are employed as limited-contract lecturers or professors at Japanese universities often move from one short-term contract position to another while finding ways to develop as educators and researchers. This is a phenomenological qualitative study that explores the lived experiences and the professional goals and concerns of limited-term contract teachers at Japanese higher education institutions who were surveyed and interviewed about their professional development goals and concerns. The findings from this study were analyzed and interpreted applying Biesta et al.'s (2015) agency model of the past, present, and future while situating them within three thematic categories—life and professional histories, concerns, and future aspirations.

Keywords: limited-term contract positions, Japan, universities, professional development, EFL

## 要旨

日本の大学における有期労働契約は1990年代半ばより増加傾向にあるのに対し、テニユア職（終身契約職）は減少の傾向にある(Talbot & Mercer, 2018)。外国語としての英語(EFL)教員の有期労働契約により提示される条件は、契約期間、研究費その他の予算、給与、ボーナス、学内勤務時間、週あたりの担当授業数、授業外のその他の業務の点において多様である。日本の大学で有期契約として雇用されているEFL教員の講師や教授は、短期契約の職を転々としながら教育者や研究者としてキャリアを積む。本研究は現象学的質的研究であり、日本の高等教育機関の有期労働契約の教員を対象に生活体験、職業的な目標と懸念を調査・インタビューを行ったものであり、日本の有期労働契約の教員が抱くキャリア開発上の到達目標と関心事について探るものである。本研究の結果は、Biestaら(2015)による過去、現在、未来のエージェンシー・モデルを適用し、人生、職歴、将来の目標という三つのテーマ的カテゴリーに分類し、分析・解釈したものである。

## 1 Literature Review

During the high-growth period of the 1970s and 1980s, Japan was known for its favorable labor

practices where large companies would offer lifetime employment (Sato et al., 2015). In addition to job stability, lifetime employment perks included bonuses once or twice a year and subsidized corporate housing to its employees. Lifetime employment to Japanese male graduates of universities or high schools represented about 30 percent of the workforce, which contrasted with Japanese female employees who often worked part time or were hired on limited contracts and were expected to leave the workforce after getting married (Firkola, 2006). In the 1990s, Japanese management practices began to change due to the collapse of Japan's bubble economy, aging demographics, rising costs, global competition, and the spread of information technology (Firkola, 2006). Consequently, a two-tier system was created where more non-regular part-time or contract workers who fulfilled the same job requirements as lifetime employees were hired to cut costs, while lifetime employment resumed for those who were able to secure it when it was made available to them. Despite the growth in the number of non-regular workers in Japanese companies, lifetime employment has not disappeared from traditional management practices because at large companies such as Canon it is thought that "the employee could grow and prosper with the company over the long term" (Firkola, 2006, p. 126). In other words, to this day large Japanese companies prefer to hire blank slate employees who they could easily shape to fit their unique values, culture, and in-house training style (Aspinall, 2010).

Employment practices at Japanese universities mirror hiring practices of large Japanese companies. Japanese universities, especially elite universities, are known for academic inbreeding or institutional inbreeding because they frequently offer tenure to their own graduate students as faculty after completion of their doctorate studies (Horta et al., 2011). Institutional inbreeding at Japanese academic institutions is similar to lifetime employment practices in Japanese companies where companies train their young employees and guarantee them a job for life. Although institutional inbreeding may promote long-term commitment to a particular institution, it contributes to the spread of parochial thinking and lack of awareness of diverse views, which in turn feeds into hiring practices that are intended to maintain an "old boys network" isolated from reality (Horta et al., 2011). Nonetheless, institutional breeding at Japanese universities remains prevalent and is one of the ways in which many graduate students are ensured lifetime employment at the universities at which they have chosen to study.

The institutional inbreeding practices previously mentioned tend to apply to Japanese nationals rather than to foreign nationals. For foreign nationals, it was not until 1984 that the first tenure-track position was awarded to a foreign professor at Kyushu University (Kuwamura, 2009). Although there have been some efforts to internationalize higher education in Japan through the recruitment of foreign students and offering of global programs, there is a shortage in the hiring of international faculty and staff who can help in diversifying programs and institutions (Kuwamura, 2009). Moreover, even when foreign nationals are hired and may eventually be given tenure, they are marginalized from making real decisions (Brotherhood et al., 2020), tokenized for being foreign, and are assigned to teach language courses that do not always match their field of specialization. According to Rogers (2014) and Chen (2022), teaching language skills is often considered to be lower in status than lecturing on a topic of expertise, making hiring of foreign nationals less attractive to Japanese universities that would like to maintain their status as research institutions rather than foreign language breeding grounds.

Foreign nationals teaching at Japanese higher institutions often begin with non-regular employment as part-time or limited-term contract teachers. Unlike tenured professors who have lifetime employment, part-time or limited-term contract teachers whose numbers have increased since the 1990s do not benefit from job security (Sato et al., 2015; Talbot & Mercer, 2018). Part-time teachers usually teach classes at a number of universities and have more teaching hours than tenured professors or limited-term contract teachers. Limited-term contract teachers may teach from six to ten classes a week in addition to fulfilling administrative and managerial responsibilities. Unlike part-time teachers, they may receive housing subsidies, research and travel budgets, health insurance, and bonuses depending on what the university decides to offer to them. They often move from one limited-term contract to another after they have completed their contracts that can be anywhere from three to 10 years. That being said, some limited-term contract teachers do secure tenured jobs after they have completed several contract jobs.

In 2013, changes to Japan's Labor Contract Act were made to ameliorate the working conditions of non-regular workers by allowing them to apply to change their employment status to permanent after five years (Fuisting, 2017). Unfortunately, universities found a loophole in the policy and decided to restrict

limited-term teaching contracts to five or fewer years so that they would not be obliged to offer permanent employment to non-regular workers who account for at least 40 percent of the workforce (Osaki, 2015). Some Japanese universities decided to rehire teachers for another five years after a six-month non-employment period (Sato et al., 2015). The rehiring of teachers usually meant that they began at the lower pay scale and had to move up again as they had done prior to the six-month hiatus. For many limited-term contract teachers who need a constant flow of income, taking six months of unemployment and returning to the position at a lower pay scale is less than optimal. As for part-time teachers, some universities decided to abide by the Labor Contract Act and have granted them permanency after they have completed their five years of teaching at the university.

The current hiring practices that exist in Japanese higher education institutions can be summarized as follows: academic inbreeding of Japanese nationals is omnipresent at elite universities; tenure is difficult to attain for foreign nationals and even if they do secure tenure, they are often marginalized; and contract teachers are considered to be replaceable. Chen (2022) insists that foreign nationals should not be categorized as token visitors to Japan. For many foreign nationals, Japan is their home away from home, and they would like to be offered job security, integration in the workplace, and a voice as key stakeholders in higher education institutions in Japan. If Japan continues to do things the Japanese way and expects foreigners to accept less than favorable working conditions, it will become increasingly difficult for it to attract and keep highly-skilled workers who can contribute to raising Japan's global ranking not only in higher education institutions but also in other areas such as international business (Morita, 2017).

## 2 Research Design

This is a phenomenological qualitative study that explores the lived experiences and the professional goals and concerns of limited-term contract teachers at Japanese higher education institutions. Phenomenology is defined as the study of phenomena as experienced by a person in his or her life (Sloan & Bowe, 2014) and is used to describe the experience of a person by asking questions about what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns (Villegas, n.d.). The theoretical underpinning of this study is teacher agency—how teachers may or may not feel empowered to take ownership of their own professional development (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency should be investigated through three different lens: influences from the past (iterational), engagement to the present (practical-evaluative), and orientation to the future (projective). Biesta et al.'s (2015) expansion of Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) agency model facilitates the understanding of the achievement of agency. The iterational lens consists of life histories and professional histories, which influence the practical-evaluative lens. The practical-evaluative lens includes cultural beliefs and ideas, social structures, and materials. Lastly, the projective lens is comprised of short and long-term goals, which impact the practical-evaluative lens.

The teachers who participated in this study have worked for at least two Japanese universities as limited-term contract EFL teachers. Two teachers in this study began their careers in Japan on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program managed by the government of Japan that offers opportunities for foreign nationals to work in schools, boards of education, and government offices throughout Japan. Their JET experience gave them the chance to learn Japanese, work in a variety of educational environments excluding universities, and live in communities where they were seen as the global ambassador. The teachers are foreign nationals from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States who have decided to teach in Japan for a variety of reasons. Among the seven teachers who filled out the online survey (see Appendix 1) in January of 2023, five teachers agreed to be interviewed (see Appendix 2) about their professional goals and concerns on Zoom for approximately 40 minutes in March of 2023. Prior to being interviewed, the teachers reviewed the consent form and interview questions. At the beginning of the interview, the consent statement was reiterated, and the interviewees were told that the interview would be recorded. Immediately after the interview, they were sent an Amazon gift card valued at 2500 yen. Approximately one or two days after the interview, notes from the interviews were emailed to the interviewees, who confirmed the accuracy and validity of the content. All of the teachers replied with corrections or clarifications.

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences and the professional goals and concerns

of limited-term contract teachers at Japanese higher educations. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the life and professional histories of limited-term contract teachers?
2. What concerns do they have regarding their professional development? Why do they have these concerns?
3. How do limited-term contract teachers envision their path for professional development?

### 3 Findings

The findings from this study were analyzed and interpreted applying Biesta et al.'s (2015) agency model of the past, present, and future while situating them within three thematic categories—life and professional histories, concerns, and future aspirations.

#### *(1) Life and Professional Histories*

The limited-term contract teachers in this study had diverse life and professional histories. In addition to teaching at Japanese universities, many had experience teaching or managing educational programs in their home countries and in foreign countries including Japan. In Japan, some of the teachers taught at conversation schools, cram schools, junior high schools, high schools, and in companies before launching their teaching careers in Japanese higher education institutions. Their experience teaching in environments other than Japanese universities helped them decide to pursue teaching as a long-term career, complete graduate degrees in education-related fields, and extend their stay in Japan for various personal and professional reasons. As the teachers in this study became more active in expanding their teaching careers, they built their careers as researchers in a specific field, published their research findings, gave presentations at conferences, and networked with a larger Community of Practice (CoP), defined as a group of people who share social practices and work together toward common goals (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Their ongoing research in the professional development of EFL teachers in higher education, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and psychology in education facilitated their integration into a CoP—initially as newcomers and eventually as old-timers with established identities and full membership to the group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). At times, they collaborated with teachers with similar research interests and jointly published their findings and gave presentations at conferences.

The paths that teachers took to reside in Japan for an extended period of time varied. One female teacher who first came to Japan to teach at a private high school on the JET program decided to return to Japan after getting her graduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) and a certificate in language instruction. When she was hired as an EFL teacher and conversation partner for a summer English as Second Language (ESL) program catering to students from a private university in Japan, she realized that the ties she had created with these Japanese students and their university would benefit her when applying for jobs in Japan. She decided to apply for job openings at their private university and eventually landed a job to teach and coordinate the EFL program at their university. Therefore, the connections she had made while teaching at the summer ESL program for Japanese university students sparked her career teaching at higher education institutions in Japan. Another female teacher came to Japan because she wanted to live in a monoculture culture like Japan to see how it would or would not change over time. Moreover, she wanted to be in a country that was safe or somewhere she could move by herself without having to worry about her surroundings. Therefore, she decided that working for a dispatch company that would send her to teach at Japanese high schools and universities would help launch her career teaching in universities overseas. In Japan, she met her Japanese spouse and decided to stay in Japan to be close to her husband's family and raise her two children. Two male teachers came to Japan for family reasons. One teacher followed his Japanese spouse, who had a teaching job at a Japanese university. Another teacher decided with his Japanese spouse to move to Japan so that they could reside closer to her family and raise their children together in Japan. The histories of these teachers illustrate that taking advantage of professional ties to Japan, having a personal interest to live in Japan, and fulfilling family obligations were reasons why some of the limited-term contract teachers in this study decided to start a career teaching EFL in Japan and eventually stay for the long term.

#### *(2) Concerns as Limited-Term Contract Teachers*

The teachers in this study expressed positive and negative aspects of being hired as a limited-term

contract teacher at Japanese universities. One of the advantages of working as a limited-term contract teacher was that compared to part-time instructors, they had health care and pension benefits. Moreover, depending on the university they worked for, they could receive research and other funding, bonuses, and a higher job title. Regarding their teaching, as they were often assigned to teach in English programs with motivated EFL learners, they could focus on their teaching practices and methods instead of being distracted by classroom management and disciplinary problems. At some universities, the teachers had managerial responsibilities such as designing curriculum, working with part-time teachers to create streamlined courses, organizing events at self-access learning centers, and working on university committees. Most teachers felt that the managerial responsibilities gave them a deeper understanding of how universities operate at higher levels and how they might be able to contribute to the university beyond the classroom environment.

Limited-term contract teachers recognized that the strong ties among the limited-term contract teachers assisted them in expanding their CoP. As previously mentioned, they chose to work together on research projects, especially if they shared similar research interests. In this study, the two teachers who were interested in CLIL collaborated on research projects and gave presentations on their research results. In terms of professional development, they helped each other with finding jobs, shared information about doctoral degree programs, and exchanged ideas on how to teach online during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019. In fact, one teacher said that striking a good balance between collaboration and independence was important in keeping a strong CoP among the teachers. During the pandemic when everything was new to them, they collaborated extensively because they had no choice but to “go through something like that together.”

The limited-term contract teachers had a myriad of concerns with job instability at the top of their list. Although unlimited contracts that are renewed annually until retirement do exist at Japanese universities (Fuisting, 2017), they are rare and hard to obtain as teachers in such positions are more likely to stay in those contracts for the long term. Unlike unlimited contracts, the teachers in this study had limited-term contracts of five years because the 2013 amendment in Japan’s Labor Contract Act that required employers to grant permanent status to contractual employees after five years was interpreted and implemented to benefit the employer rather than the employee. In fact, due to this amendment, a limited-term contract teacher who was on a three-year unlimited renewal contract was forced to leave his position after five years. His example illustrates that some unlimited contracts that have existed before 2013 have disappeared, thereby contributing to the rise in more shorter-term contract positions. Overall, it appears that progress towards more job stability for contract teachers in Japan remains uncertain. One teacher summarized how it felt to be a limited-term contract teacher. “The limited-term contract system offers little stability for anyone’s life. There is a cliff edge at the end of every limited-term contract with the teacher not knowing where, if any, the next place of employment will be. It is a very stressful situation.” Jumping from one cliff to another may be possible for some, and for others they may even land on a higher cliff of permanent employment. However, if there is not another cliff to hang on to, teachers may find themselves unemployed or having to find a lower cliff to hang on to such as teaching part time.

Another concern that teachers shared was that having a limited-term contract job made it difficult to build a long-term career as a teacher and a researcher because their contribution at the university terminated with the end of their contract. One limited-term contract teacher expressed his exasperation saying, “It is a pity that one cannot carry the currency over to the next job because what was accomplished in a previous contract job does not necessarily carry on to the next contract job.” Their path towards professional development was not progressive in any linear sense; in reality, it appeared to be stifled as some universities did not provide research support that would build their academic careers as teachers in the classroom and researchers in a larger CoP. Fuisting’s (2017) study of the professional identities of limited-term contract teachers in Japanese universities echoed similar concerns about the short-term vision that Japanese universities had towards limited-term contract teachers. Even if limited-term contract teachers may have a vested interest in making lasting contributions at Japanese universities, the lack of financial and professional support from their universities made them feel unappreciated and expendable (Fuisting, 2017). One teacher in this study asked, “Do contract workers have a career, or simply a string of jobs?” All of the limited-term contract teachers in this study wanted a career where they could contribute to the universities at which they worked at, but they felt that their sentiment was not mutually shared by

their employers. In the end, they were left hanging on the edge of the cliff, hoping that they would land a job in the future where they might possibly be able to make a long-term impact on their careers and at the institutions.

### ***(3) Future Aspirations***

Three teachers in this study decided to pave their own path towards professional development by enrolling in a doctoral program in Japan or elsewhere. “Enrolling in a doctorate program would help focus my research and become more of an expert in my field. It would also help to secure a full-time position, which would allow me to better help an institution and become part of the community.” These teachers were aware of the growing pressures of getting a doctorate (Hada, 2005; Kellem, 2020) to land a tenured job with lifetime employment, professional growth potential, and networking opportunities. The teachers who were not pursuing degrees were either contemplating the possibility, prioritizing other work-life balance issues, thinking that a doctorate did not guarantee better job opportunities, or speculating that they were at a point in their careers where the returns of getting a doctorate were not in their favor. Nonetheless, for limited-term contract teachers, getting a doctorate if they had the time to do it and when they were at a time in their lives when the returns would be worthwhile indicated that in addition to working full time at their university, they were trying to complete their doctoral dissertation within a reasonable timeframe. While completing their doctorate, the teachers were also job hunting in their last two years of their contract, which meant that a lot of their time was spent trying to navigate an opaque working environment (Brotherhood et al., 2020) that was difficult to comprehend without mentors who could assist them in securing tenured jobs. All in all, the teachers felt that juggling their full-time job, their doctoral studies, and job hunting for a better job made their personal and professional lives stressful. They also admitted that their contribution to the university was compromised in their final years because they had to expend most of their energy on job hunting. “Not only is it personally a difficult and stressful process to undergo every five years, it also decreases the quality of the last year on contract. From summer to late fall semester, applications, preparation, and interviews must occur. This takes away any other time to work on research or other activities that could benefit the institution.”

When the teachers were asked about the differences between tenured and limited-term contract teachers, they listed higher salaries, job stability, higher research budgets, longer-term contributions, growth within a single higher education institution, Japanese language requirement, and more responsibilities out of the classroom. One limited-term contract teacher who decided not to pursue a doctorate said that tenure in Japanese higher education is in name only and devoid of any power, with sacrifices made such as attending many meetings and being involved in committee work that teachers such as herself did not find particularly appealing. Consequently, she deliberately chose not to pursue a tenured job. Instead, her future aspirations were online teaching, specialist training, giving craft workshops, and having YouTube sessions. As she had 10 years of management experience in the United States and had completed three limited-term contract positions at Japanese universities, she was focused on her retirement in the United States and how she would use her prior managerial experiences in the United States and teaching experiences in Japan to work in areas beyond language teaching. Another teacher said he would complete a few more limited-term contracts and then shift to becoming a part-time teacher until he was forced to retire. Therefore, some teachers who decided not to enroll in a doctoral program had other aspirations that were not necessarily connected to getting a tenured job at a Japanese university.

## **4 Conclusion**

This phenomenological quality study of the lived experiences of limited-term contract teachers applied Biesta et al.’s (2015) agency model of the past, present, and future while situating the findings within three thematic categories—life and professional histories, concerns, and future aspirations. The diverse life and professional histories of the limited-term contract teachers demonstrate how having professional connections to Japan, a personal interest in Japanese culture and society, and living near their spouse’s family members prompted them to pursue a long-term career teaching EFL in Japan. Their concerns regarding limited-term contracts were a lack of job stability, limited support from their employers in their research and professional development, and being unable to make a lasting impact at their universities. As for future aspirations, some teachers in this study decided to enroll in a doctoral program because they

thought it would help them get a tenured job with more job stability, research funding, and possibilities to make long-term impacts at a university. However, some teachers stated that a tenured job was not necessary for them to grow professionally as they had other future aspirations that were not confined to language teaching. This study illustrates that universities and limited-term contract teachers would benefit more if there was a greater investment from universities in the professional development of their limited-term contract teachers. The teachers in this study aspired to make positive contributions to their university in their own ways—through their managerial background, research expertise, or CoP. Some teachers hoped for more dialogue to occur between them and their universities for a mutually beneficial outcome. “It is important for educators to feel valued by having a standardized, impersonal way for dialogue. There should be clear pathways and well-intentioned dialogue. It should not be up to one individual to have to fight for change.” Teachers have their own life and professional histories, concerns, and future aspirations. Their voices should be heard so that limited-term contract teachers at Japanese universities can make long-term impacts at Japanese universities while also building on their own professional development.

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## Appendix 1: Consent Form and Survey Questions (n=7)

I give permission to (author) to collect data for this research project and write academic articles based on the data she collects. I understand that my real name will not be revealed in any way and that I have the right to refuse that any of my data be distributed.

(signed and dated)

1. How long have you been teaching at Japanese universities?
2. Why did you choose this career?
3. How did your career path change over time?
4. What were some of the lessons (if any) that you learned earlier in your career teaching EFL?
5. What do you think are the benefits (if any) of having limited-term contract employment at higher education institutions in Japan?
6. What do you think are the disadvantages (if any) of having limited-term contract employment at higher education institutions in Japan?
7. If you have had limited contract positions at other universities, how would you compare your contract position there with your position at (name of university)?
8. Are you pursuing a doctorate? YES or NO
9. If you answered YES to question 8, what was your motivation for pursuing a doctorate degree?
10. If you are not enrolled in a doctorate program now, do you intend to enroll in one in the future? YES or NO or MAYBE
11. If yes answered YES to Q10, why are you planning on enrolling in a doctorate in the future?
12. If you answered NO to Q10, why not?
13. Do your future plans involve working at a higher education institution in Japan as a tenured faculty member? YES or NO or MAYBE
14. What do you think are the benefits (if any) of having tenure at higher education institutions in Japan?
15. What do you think are the disadvantages (if any) of having tenure at higher education institutions in Japan?
16. Do you intend on having a tenured position at higher education institutions outside of Japan? YES or NO or MAYBE
17. If you answered yes to Q16, why would you like to work outside of Japan as a tenured faculty member?
18. Would you be willing to participate in a Zoom session (about 40 minutes) about your professional development goals? YES or NO or MAYBE  
[You will be compensated for your time with an Amazon gift card of 2500 yen.]
19. If you answered YES to Q18, can you please write an email address where you can be contacted?

## Appendix 2: Consent Form and Interview Questions (n=5)

I give permission to (author) to collect data for this research project and write academic articles based on the data she collects. I understand that my real name will not be revealed in any way and that I have the right to refuse that any of my data be distributed.

(signed and dated)

1. Why did you choose to teach in Japan?
2. How do you envision your career path to look like in the next 10 years? 20 years?
3. What do you think is the biggest difference between having a contract and a tenured job at universities in Japan?
4. Can you describe your ideal teaching job, remuneration, responsibilities, etc.?
5. How do you think your current job matches your ideals you mentioned above?
6. If you were a tenured professor, what would you do for contract professors to improve their situation?