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Japanese Physical Education Teachers' Positioning in Teaching Physical Education Classes Including Japanese Language Learners in Middle Schools

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain Japanese physical education (PE) teachers' positioning in teaching and assisting Japanese Language Learners (JLLs) in middle school PE classes. We used a descriptive-qualitative design and conducted semi-structured interviews with six Japanese middle school PE teachers to understand their challenges in teaching JLLs, specifically regarding communication, maintaining a safe learning environment, and integrating JLLs into their classes. Three major interrelated and complex themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) teachers' negotiation of their position between "facilitator" and "teacher" in class (b) teachers' positioning through the use of instructional aids for JLLs, and (c) teachers' dilemmas concerning equity- and equality-based assessment and evaluation for JLLs. The findings suggest that teachers may benefit from supplemental training and instructional materials regarding pedagogical approaches, instructional aids, and assessments that enhance the quality of instruction and strengthen teachers' capacity to meet JLLs' unique needs in PE.

KEYWORDS

Positioning theory; middle school teacher; inclusive physical education; second language learner; teacher education

Introduction

In recent years, Japan has experienced an increasingly aging population and a declining birthrate, which has led to a number of economic concerns such as a shrinking workforce and reduced tax base. These demographic shifts have also affected schools; in rural regions, for instance, the number of Japanese students has declined, and education services have contracted (Matanle, 2014). At the same time, the number of foreign residents in Japan has increased substantially in recent years, as regions experiencing depopulation and labor shortages have increasingly turned to foreign migration to help offset these demographic and economic pressures (Oo & Tsukai, 2023). This has resulted in increased ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity in public schools (Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2021). According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2023), the number of Japanese Language Learners (JLLs), or students requiring Japanese language support, increased by approximately 49,500 over the eight years from 2016 to 2023, representing an increase of approximately 48.7%.

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In Japan, it is legally established that all students in the country have the right to receive education without discrimination based on race, language, origin, or the background of their parents (Article 4 of the Basic Act on Education, Japan government, 2006). However, Japanese schools and teachers, including physical education (PE) teachers, have traditionally assumed that all students in their classes are proficient in the Japanese language (Sakuma, 2009). As a result, significant concerns have been raised that schools and teachers are not prepared to adequately support JLLs' learning or to meaningfully address issues of social justice and diversity in educational settings (e.g., respecting JLLs' linguistic and cultural backgrounds) (Okazaki, 2021). Gerdin et al. (2020) suggested that PE is an important academic subject for helping all students to engage with issues of social justice and diversity through social interaction and communication, and for learning about personal differences while participating in physical activities. In particular, the middle school level is a critical developmental window where students undergo rapid physical, cognitive, and social changes (e.g., peer relationships, social belongings), making it a pivotal stage for shaping long-term trajectories through inclusive PE (Russo et al., 2024). Additionally, unlike elementary school, where classroom teachers often lead PE, middle school PE is taught by specialized subject teachers in Japan. This transition increases the academic rigor and focus on specific sports disciplines, which can create a higher barrier to entry for JLLs navigating complex technical instructions and social dynamics (Sato et al., 2022). In this sense, PE teachers may be able to use their academic subject as a powerful tool to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion, contribute mutual respect, and educate diverse students together across different backgrounds, by promoting the concepts of teamwork, fairness, empathy, and respect for the opponent through a game or activity in PE (Dubey, 2024). Since compulsory education in Japan lasts for only nine years, from elementary through middle school (School Education Law, Article 45, Japan government, 1947), PE at the middle school level is particularly important for some JLLs before they decide to seek immediate career opportunities rather than continuing on to high school. As the final stage of compulsory education in Japan, middle school PE provide some JLLs with the last opportunities to experience inclusion and belonging through shared physical activities and interaction with others.

In this context, positive academic and social relationships between teachers and students may be particularly important for JLLs. Hahn Tapper (2013) suggested that meaningful educational experiences are created through the transmission of knowledge as well as engagement between teachers and students. Therefore, in the PE context, from this perspective, PE teachers should not only deliver PE lessons, but they can also learn how to reposition themselves from instructors to facilitators who support students' understanding, participation, and inclusion in social justice and diversity issues (Samalot-Rivera et al., 2018).

Physical education teachers' experiences in teaching second language learners in physical education at secondary schools

With the continued growth of international migration worldwide (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023), schools across many countries are encountering challenges in meeting the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Forghani-Arani et al., 2019). There are several studies, for example, that have explored the experiences of

PE teachers and immigrant and refugee students in PE classes in various countries, including Chile (Mujica-Johnson et al., 2025), Sweden (Caldeborg, 2022), Switzerland (Barker et al., 2014), Norway (Thorjussen & Sisjord, 2018), Spain (Lleixà & Nieva, 2020), and the United States (Samalot-Rivera et al., 2018), among others. More specifically, Thorjussen and Sisjord (2018) found that PE teachers in Norway had various challenges when they responded to students' social justice and diversity issues and concerns based on ethnicity, gender, and cultural background. More specifically, they suggest that unless ethnic and cultural diversity are actively integrated, these differences may trigger tension rather than serve as a catalyst for enrichment. Additionally, Samalot-Rivera et al., (2018) noted that PE teachers in the USA may struggle to adapt instruction in ways that meaningfully include English Language Learners (ELLs) while responding to their academic, social, and cultural needs. At the same time, PE teachers have been reported to feel ill-equipped to deal with the cross-cultural issues associated with teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students, suggesting a need for further training (Lleixà & Nieva, 2020).

In the context of Japan, Sato et al., (2024) recently studied PE teachers' positioning in teaching JLLs in high schools, finding that high school PE teachers expressed serious concerns about creating a safe learning environment due to JLLs' unfamiliarity with how to safely use Japanese PE equipment and teachers' own inability to anticipate JLLs' behaviors. Many teachers in Japan, including PE teachers, have little experience working with JLLs and schools often lack sufficient resources, support, and infrastructure to meet the needs of JLLs, which can result in an unsafe learning environment (Ishida et al., 2016). In addition, student-teacher communication in PE classes may also be hindered by language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and misinterpretation of nonverbal cues. Because these challenges require support beyond simple instruction, PE teachers often find themselves and are viewed by students as host parents for JLLs. This shift aligns with Smit et al.'s (2008) argument that the lines between education, parenting, and care are increasingly blurred. Similarly, Fauzi et al. (2019) found that teachers often need to navigate their dual roles as both instructors and secondary parents for students. Sato et al., (2024) found that teachers struggled to negotiate their varying responsibilities because they may overstep boundaries as host parents and teachers. More specifically, teachers need to pay attention to two different types of responsibilities: interpersonal and intrapersonal. Interpersonal responsibilities can lead to conflicts that exist between teachers, students, and an organization (i.e., schools) such as a disagreement over the educational vision for JLLs. They also suggested that intrapersonal responsibility focuses on how a teacher is required to establish their own internal rulebooks when two different roles of being a strict instructor and/or a nurturing host parent for JLLs (Lipsky et al., 2017).

Although there is a growing body of research on Japanese teachers' positioning in teaching JLLs in PE at the high school level, there remains limited research focusing on middle school teachers' positioning in teaching JLLs in Japan. This context is important to study because middle school is the final phase of compulsory education in Japan, and little is known about how Japanese middle school teachers understand and interpret their experiences of teaching PE for JLLs.

Japanese PE curriculum in middle schools

In Japan, middle schools (*chūgakkō*) provide three years of education for students aged approximately 12 to 15. The school year starts on April 1 each year and ends the following March. The middle school curriculum consists of Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science, music, arts, technology and home economics, foreign languages, moral education, and health and PE (health and PE are considered one subject area in Japan). Middle schools are institutions "in the secondary stage of compulsory education system with the purpose of providing general education commensurate with students' mental and physical development on the basis of primary school education" (School Education Law, Article 45, Japan government, 1947, p. 15). In Japan, although high school is not compulsory, students wishing to enroll must apply and pass selective, school-specific entrance exams, which primarily consist of written achievement tests. Japanese high school entrance examinations are notorious for their high stakes and immense pressure (Sato et al., 2022).

The middle school PE curriculum aims to develop the following competencies (a) understanding mind and body as one, (b) maintaining and promoting physical and mental health, (c) realizing a fulfilling lifelong sports life, (d) applying PE and health education perspectives and approaches, and (e) identifying problems and learning through logical problem-solving processes (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017). Physical education lessons are typically 50 min long, and a total of 105 mandatory hours per year are allocated for PE in all public middle schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017). The PE curriculum views the body and mind from a holistic perspective and encourages students to become physically active and participate in rigorous physical activity programs. The ultimate objective is to cultivate an attitude that leads students to live a healthful and cheerful life that integrates physical activity (Nakai & Metzler, 2005).

Theoretical framework and purpose

This study is based on positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), which is situated in social constructionism (Slocum & Van Langenhove, 2003). In positioning theory, the term "position" is defined as the role or stance that people assign to themselves or others during social interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990). This means that individuals' rights and duties are not fixed but are negotiated through discourse in a specific social context. Individuals use language to create shifting "positions" for themselves and others, which determine what actions are deemed legitimate and what responsibilities are assigned within an ongoing social storyline (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Positioning theory can be used to see how PE teachers position themselves through a storyline when they interact with JLLs in academic and social contexts. Positioning varies not just from moment to moment and across time, but also across situations (Tomura et al., 2024). Because positioning is influenced by context, understanding its influence and consequences for students' learning requires teachers to pay attention not only to academic content but also to the social context through which participation and meaning are negotiated (Erickson, 1982).

This study focused on four different types of positioning in understanding how teachers construct their identities through discourse by adopting different "positions" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). These positions are a) deliberate self-positioning, b)

forced self-positioning, c) deliberate other-positioning, and d) forced other-positioning (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). These positioning types can influence Japanese PE teachers' positioning when they deal with lesson plans, classroom management, and instructional goals and objectives for JLLs at middle schools. First, deliberate self-positioning refers to when a teacher takes a particular position for specific reasons (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). For example, when a PE teacher reflects on their self-positioning, they may consciously choose their own positioning as either a "supporter" or "leader," who serves roles and responsibilities for JLLs in PE. In this case, when they intentionally position themselves as a "leader," they take responsibility for guiding the lesson and making pedagogical decisions, which may include proactively adjusting instructional content, explanations, or task structures to better support JLLs' participation and learning. When they position themself as a "supporter," they find ways to support JLLs, such as assigning a Japanese student as a peer tutor or supporter for JLLs, so that they can observe, facilitate, and enhance the quality of instruction (James, 2011).

Second, forced self-positioning refers to when a teacher positions or repositions themself based on external forces beyond his or her control. For example, there may be a situation in which a PE teacher is forced by external expectations (e.g. parents, other teachers, or mentors) to position themself as a "strict manager" or "supervisor," even if they are not in favor of these positions. This might result in the teacher being forced to serve in the role and responsibility of strict manager or supervisor, who is expected to follow school policy, rules, and pressures, even if they may receive compliance issues or complaints from parents or JLLs (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

Third, deliberate other-positioning occurs when teachers and students intentionally step into the shoes of another group (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), such as JLLs. Previous research has found that helping local students take on perspectives of immigrant and refugee classmates can improve social cohesion and behavior (Alan et al., 2021). In a PE setting, teachers might encourage Japanese students to reflect on how linguistic or cultural hurdles influence their JLL peers' experience. For example, by exposing Japanese students to culturally emergent physical activities (e.g., salsa dance), the students can better understand the experience of their JLL peers.

Lastly, forced other-positioning refers to when a teacher or the curriculum or educational system compels students to adopt a different perspective, often without their consent, leading to potential psychological harm, resentment, or manipulation (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). For example, in PE, Japanese students may be required to act as supporters or interpreters for JLLs, or JLLs may be expected to adapt to the dominant norms of the class without sufficient negotiation. Abdi (2025) notes that students are sometimes positioned in roles and expectations that they do not fully embrace, which may create discomfort, anxiety, or reluctance and may make inclusive participation in PE more difficult.

The purpose of this study is to describe and explain Japanese PE teachers' positioning in teaching and assisting JLLs during middle school PE classes. There were two research questions that guided the study:

(a) What were Japanese PE teachers' experiences in teaching JLLs in middle school PE classes?
(b) How did Japanese PE teachers position themselves and others in teaching JLLs in middle school PE classes?

Method

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative design using an in-depth, semi-structured interview approach (Seidman, 2019). Data collection for this study was conducted between August and November 2023. Interviews were scheduled immediately after the final bell (e.g., around 4:00 pm or later). The purpose of employing the interview method was to describe and explain the positioning of Japanese PE teachers while exploring the meanings they attributed to their experiences. Interviews are widely recognized as a powerful tool for gaining insight into the educational and social phenomena experienced by individuals within educational contexts (Seidman, 2019). Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to collect rich, in-depth data on participants' perspectives, reflections on specific experiences, and meaning-making processes, including how teachers interpret and negotiate their roles in practice, data that are difficult to capture through surveys or more structured methods alone (Gay, 1996).

This approach made it possible to investigate PE teachers' positioning in teaching JLLs and their reflections on the educational and communication challenges they faced. Drawing on an insider's perspective, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six PE teachers who were actively engaged in teaching JLLs in middle schools. The study aimed to explain and analyze participants' recognition of their experiences, shedding light on their unique perspectives and challenges in this educational context.

Participants and setting

The research sites were public middle schools located in the Kanto and Tokai regions of Japan. The researcher used snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017) to purposefully recruit six Japanese middle school PE teachers (male $n = 5$; female $n = 1$) from six different public middle schools (see Table 1 for demographic information). During the snowball sampling procedure, the researcher identified a potential participant and requested them to

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of teaching experience	JLLs' first languages
Mr. Matsui	Male	9	English, Portuguese, Tagalog
Mr. Kato	Male	11	Chinese, English Korean
Mr. Kuraki	Male	20	Chinese, English Portuguese, Tagalog
Ms. Watabe	Female	11	Chinese, English Korean, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog
Mr. Okabe	Male	7	Chinese, English Portuguese, Turkish
Mr. Oda	Male	27	Chinese, English Malay

assist in recruiting additional participants. The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were: (1) in-service health and physical education teachers at middle schools, who (2) were currently teaching JLLs in PE, and who (3) had no prior experience with workshops related to social justice and diversity in PE.

All ethical standards for research involving human participants were adhered to in the conduct of this study. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institute of Health and Sport Sciences ethics committee at University of Tsukuba (approval No. 022-100) in September 2022. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Before participation, a consent form and a brief questionnaire on basic demographic information were distributed to the participants, and only those who provided written consent took part in the study.

Participant interviews

The study used online, real-time interviews as a medium for the Japanese middle school PE teachers to reflect on and speak about communication challenges, concerns about maintaining a safe learning environment, and their experiences including JLLs in PE classes at middle schools. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. A 12-question interview guide was developed for the study based on Sato et al., (2019). Specifically, the protocol included questions intended to explore how teachers understood their own roles when teaching JLLs in PE, how their approaches changed through their experiences, and how their responses were shaped in relation to colleagues and school contexts. The interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, were open-ended, and assumed a conversational tone. Examples of interview questions include: (a) Have you ever conducted lessons that take into account the cultural backgrounds of JLLs? Could you share specific examples? (b) What do you always keep in mind when teaching JLLs? (c) Did your teaching approaches change as you gained experience teaching JLLs? (d) Have you ever received guidance or advice from other teachers with experience teaching JLLs? Or, have you provided guidance or advice to other teachers?

E-mail follow-up communication

E-mail messages were used to ask follow-up questions and/or to seek clarification of previous responses (Meho, 2007). When there was a need to clarify the contents of interview interactions, the researcher asked the participant to respond by e-mail.

Data translation process

This study was informed by elements of the cross-cultural translation technique (Banville et al., 2000) to take the data collected in Japanese and analyze and report it in English. Although that technique was originally developed for translating questionnaires and inventories, we adapted its committee-based review procedures for the translation of qualitative interview data. The committee-based approach recommended by Banville et al. (2000) involves researchers conducting the initial translations, after which these translations are discussed, revised, and confirmed with additional researcher-translators. Specifically, the

interview data were first transcribed in Japanese and then translated from Japanese to English by the lead author. The lead author compared the English translations with the Japanese originals and discussed the translation with the second author and a graduate student. The third and fourth authors (one a native English speaker and one a Japanese native speaker) then reviewed the translations for accuracy, conceptual equivalence, and clarity of expression. Any discrepancies were discussed among the research team until consensus was reached on the final English versions of the translated interview excerpts.

Finally, all researchers convened to critically compare and discuss the translations and make edits as needed. The final stage of the process was to review a copy of the reconciled translation and offer final comments and critiques.

Researcher positionality

To acknowledge the perspectives that may have influenced our interpretation of the data, we briefly describe our positionality as researchers. The first author is a Japanese PhD student, and this study is a part of her dissertation research project. She is also a health and PE teacher with experience teaching diverse students at a middle school. The second author is a Japanese professor and the first author's academic advisor. He has over 20 years of professional and study abroad experience in the United States. He is an expert in diversity and social inclusion specifically in teaching English and Japanese language learners in PE as well as in teacher education research. The third author is a bilingual American professor (English and Japanese) who has expertise in teacher education for teaching linguistically and culturally diverse learners in the Midwest region in the United States. He also has professional experience as an English teacher in Japanese public middle schools. The last author is a Japanese professor and an expert in diversity, equity, and inclusion in school health education. She has been involved in a taskforce for the national health education curriculum at MEXT.

Data analysis

This study used a constant-comparative analysis method (Boeije, 2010). In this analytical process, pieces of data are continuously compared, as its name suggests. Specifically, potentially meaningful data segments from the interviews with each participant were independently coded by the researcher. The analysis was conducted on the original Japanese transcripts and the researchers prepared the English translated version for publication. More specifically, the first author independently broke down interview data into discrete parts, assigning codes to key concepts. In this process, positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) was used as an analytic lens to interpret how teachers described and negotiated their roles, responsibilities, and interactions with JLLs in PE. More specifically, attention was paid to how teachers positioned themselves and others (e.g. JLLs, Japanese student, colleagues), how these positions shifted across situations, and contexts and how factors such as perceived expectations, rights, and duties shaped those shifts.

Then, the researcher categorized those codes by observing patterns, relationships, or shared themes. This coding process (open, axial, and selective coding) involves organizing the discrete concepts as well as meaningful clusters to explain the core narrative of the interview data (Altun, 2019). Additionally, three graduate students and one

professor as peer debriefers examined the codes to mitigate potential researcher bias. The coded data from each transcript and participant were systematically compared to identify both similarities and differences. Following the peer debriefing, the codes were organized into thematic categories, which were refined to identify recurring themes (Boeije, 2010). Finally, the refined codes were arranged into a hierarchical structure based on individual and group coding frequencies (i.e. the number of times key terms appeared in the data). All data and key term definitions were sent back to participants for member checking, where final confirmations were obtained. This process helped ensure that the thematic categories and recurring themes were reliably established (Boeije, 2010).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study was established through the processes of member checking and peer debriefing, as described earlier. These methods focus on verifying the relative accuracy of the data rather than striving for universal truth (Ahmed, 2024). Member checking was used to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts and to reduce the risk of misrepresenting participants' statements (Kocaman, 2025). To achieve this, the researcher shared copies of the interview transcripts with participants and invited them to confirm the accuracy of their statements. No participants requested substantive corrections or additional explanations regarding the transcripts. Regarding the peer debriefing, three PE researchers evaluated the methodology, data collection, analysis, and content of the results.

Results and discussion

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: (a) *teachers' position negotiation between "facilitator" and "teacher" in class* (b) *teachers' positioning through the use of instructional aids for JLLs*, and (c) *teachers' dilemmas concerning equity- and equality-based assessment and evaluation for JLLs in PE.*

Theme I: teachers' position negotiation between "facilitator" and "teacher" in class

This theme captured how teachers negotiated between two types of positions, "*facilitator*" or "*teacher*," when working with JLLs in PE classes. In line with positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), participants defined their rights and duties based on their own beliefs about effective instructional practices. However, they recognized that their prior experiences teaching PE to Japanese students were not always appropriate for teaching JLLs. As a result, they began to negotiate their own position as either a facilitator or teacher when they taught JLLs in PE, depending on the type and purpose of the lesson. For example, in the "facilitator" position, the participants created classroom discourse in PE that allows both JLLs and Japanese students to have meaningful communication and collaborative teamwork, so that JLLs can actively participate in learning activities and develop their own success stories (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). In contrast, in the "teacher" position, the participants used structured lessons and a direct teaching approach to deliver content, explain concepts, and assess progress, often adapting their instruction to address language-related challenges (Tomura et al., 2025a).

In this study, teachers' positioning was shaped by multiple contextual factors, including the instructional structure of each sport and physical activity unit. In addition, participants faced language barriers and cultural differences, which may result in JLLs being positioned (by themselves or others) as passive followers or non-participants. Therefore, teachers need to consider varying levels of peer support while teaching JLLs and Japanese students together in PE. These factors influenced how teachers navigated their roles and responsibilities in PE classes. For example, one participant, Mr. Kato, described his role in PE class:

> In PE class, I tried to support the JLL by staying close initially, using simple English and gestures to help them engage in the activity. I am not sure what is the best role, either facilitator or teacher, for teaching JLLs. Ideally, PE class should be a place where all Japanese students and JLLs can learn together through movement and interaction, so they can still participate without understanding verbal communication. I do not know how to guide them (JLLs) to be on the same page with Japanese students. This means that I need to help or rely on Japanese students who could help and support them … However, when I explain rules and routines of health components (e.g., first aid), I need to provide clear explanations using technical terms in order to prevent injury. I try to make the content more accessible through instructional materials for JLLs, but I still need to explain the concepts and ensure all the key material is covered in Japanese. I am not sure if I *facilitate* the other students' explanations or if I should *teach*. I do not know. (Mr. Kato, interview)

Mr. Kato's interview illustrates how he negotiated his position between facilitator and teacher for JLLs, depending on the content and context of PE lessons (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Davies and Harré (1990) conceptualize positioning as the dynamic negotiation of rights and duties within social interaction. Applying this concept to the present study, PE teachers' use of simplified language, gestures, and relational support can be understood as deliberate self-positioning as a facilitator, aimed at enabling JLLs' participation, rather than merely delivering content. However, Mr. Kato also described having to accept a forced-self position as a teacher who is required to demonstrate linguistic accuracy, conceptual clarity, and comprehensive content coverage, especially when dealing with safety or health concerns. Another participant, Mr. Okabe explained that his position changed when he assigned Japanese students as peer supporters who can help JLLs' learning in PE:

> When I taught team sports in PE class, all students were supposed to be physically active and improve their communication skills. I think it is important to assign Japanese students as peer supporters to maximize their social interactions with JLLs. In this situation, I observe carefully and maintain my facilitator position and figure out students' behaviours. However, teaching team sport is not easy, because it includes game strategies and sequential skills that promote JLLs' understanding of the concept of cooperative activities with other teammates in game situations. Without understanding these concepts, JLLs are excluded from participation in various activities. I sometimes try to explain those concepts directly, but I feel there is a communication barrier due to the language difference. It seems that peer supporters (Japanese students) also had difficulty effectively communicating with JLLs and guiding them to fully understand the concepts. In this situation, I focused on delivering content as clearly as possible. (Mr. Okabe, interview)

Mr. Okabe explained that, although his approach depended on the lesson content in PE, he felt peer support strategies may be particularly beneficial when teaching team sports, for all students including JLLs. According to Romano and Walker (2010), peer support can lead to gains in student engagement for all students involved, increasing social interactions, decreasing off-task behavior and isolation, supporting academic growth, and improving

students' motivation. Mr. Okabe deliberately other-positioned Japanese students not just as learners but as supporters (who act to keep the group functioning smoothly, giving social support) and helpers (who carry out routine tasks when asked to do so by another classmate) while engaging in collaborative and experiential learning with JLLs in PE class. In this deliberate other-positioning, the PE teacher may position JLLs as students who require additional support when establishing their initial positioning in the PE class. However, through various facilitating actions, including peer-support strategies and cooperative learning, teachers may reposition themselves and reposition all students including JLLs in certain class contexts (Barnes, 2004). Therefore, PE teachers need to seek clear visions in relation to obligations and expectations about how all students should decide to think and take their own action and behaviors in PE class (Barnes, 2004). Another participant, Ms. Watabe explained that having a paraeducator act as a "translator" between the teacher and JLLs, explaining instructional content in more simple language, may be one way to help teachers have instructional choices that focus on meeting the unique needs of JLLs in PE class:

> I do not currently have a paraeducator as a translator, but if I have one, I would like to ask him or her to support my instruction for JLLs in PE class. For example, when I teach swimming class, I want to ask them to translate or rephrase the instructional content into easier Japanese for JLLs. I may be able to negotiate a facilitator or teacher position better, if I have a paraeducator who can catch essential key points regarding safety rules and activities and find a better way to guide JLLs on tasks in swimming class … Without a paraeducator's support, I don't know effective ways to explain the contents and safety instructions to them, and which words I need to use in an appropriate way in order to help JLLs to understand better. And I cannot focus only on JLLs in PE class because I have to oversee the entire class and teach all students. So now my JLLs aren't entitled to enough learning and participation in PE class. (Ms. Watabe, interviews)

Following positioning theory, Ms. Watabe's roles and responsibilities are determined by personnel resource limitations that restrict her capacity to deliberately position herself as either "facilitator" or "teacher." In some physical activities (e.g. swimming class), teachers may experience a forced self-position that prevents themselves from realizing their ideal action (Davies & Harré, 1990). However, accessing a paraeducator may allow a teacher to have more deliberate instructional choices in PE class. According to Haegele et al., (2019), paraeducators in PE fulfill four key roles: (a) assisting students through movements, (b) keeping students focused and on task, (c) providing supplemental verbal cues, and (d) repeating instructions when needed. In this study, Ms. Watabe believed that if the paraeducator provides supplemental verbal cues and repeats instructions when needed for JLLs, she may be able to observe all students more effectively and, in doing so, *deliberately position herself* in ways that clarify her rights and duties when responding to JLLs (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Theme II: teachers' positioning through the use of instructional aids for JLLs

This theme highlighted that participant used various instructional aids (e.g., audio and visual aids) while teaching JLLs in PE classes. Teachers and JLLs engage in intercultural communication involving both verbal and nonverbal exchanges using translation devices or visual aids may be helpful for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. Based on

positioning theory, the teachers' actions and JLLs' responses jointly constitute the positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990). Previous studies illustrate how this joint positioning often results in JLLs occupying marginalized spaces where they struggle with content and experience significant emotional stress (Tomura et al., 2024, Tomura et al., 2025b). Without appropriate support, they may suffer from academic and social isolation, lack of confidence, and lower motivation to participate (Coyle, 2010; Horwitz et al., 1986). However, teachers can provide linguistic and instructional support using audio and visual aids that can enhance JLLs' understanding and reduce emotional stress, thereby promoting active and inclusive participation (Bashir et al., 2025). In PE contexts, teachers still have greater concerns about risks and safety due to nuanced cultural references and context-specific meanings when they use the audio and visual aids. Moreover, teachers must simultaneously monitor and teach both JLLs and Japanese students while they engage with physical activities (Choi & Chepyator-Thomson, 2011). For example, Ms. Watabe explained her experiences using a translation device. She said that:

> When I try to communicate with a JLL during class, the student does not understand Japanese, so I rely on a digital translation device in the class. However, there is a performance limitation of those devices. I had a hard time translating specialized PE terminology such as "motor skills." I found that translations are often inaccurate, which puts JLLs in a difficult situation since they cannot catch the nuance and meaning of what I want to say. Sometimes, I ask one of the JLLs to use the translation device to type terminology in their own language. However, when I asked one of the JLLs to present a group discussion to the audience (other students) using a translation device in the class, they were hesitant to present it, and another Japanese peer helped to present instead of JLLs. I have a hard time understanding why the JLL was struggling and hesitating. I often find that there is unexpected behaviour of JLLs, and I do not know what I should do next. (Ms. Watabe, interview)

Ms. Watabe explained that she believed that a translation device was the only communication technology for supporting JLLs' learning. However, she realized that translation devices are not designed for teaching academic subjects, which put the JLLs in difficult situations. Therefore, teachers are compelled to seek alternative ways of adjusting their rights and duties in order to address JLLs' unique needs. More specifically, they are forced to gain knowledge and skills in order to adjust right and duties using differentiated instruction, offering choices (speaking, drawing), using visuals/gestures, providing language buddies (Hart, 2009). Alm and Watanabe (2023) explain that teachers should be cautious in using translation devices, as their lack of interactivity and real-time responsiveness may cause teachers to fail to capture JLLs' signs of confusion, hesitation, or anxiety during lessons. Such limitations restrict teachers' situational awareness, making it harder to understand JLLs' comfort zones (Sime, 2006). Ms. Watabe's case illustrates how limited tool options can constrain teachers' ability to check JLLs' understanding and emotions, leading to an over-reliance on surface-level output from translation devices rather than direct interpretation of JLLs' behaviors. In contrast, another participant, Mr. Kuraki prepared and used various scaffolding strategies including visual aids on the whiteboard, modeling and demonstration, and gestures to support JLLs' learning. His instruction using various tools (such as visual representations) for JLLs can effectively support JLLs' comprehension by supplementing the students' limited linguistic resources (Goldin-Meadow & Wagner, 2005; Kita & Özyürek, 2003). Mr. Kuraki explained that:

> Since I was at a previous school, I had JLLs, and I've tried to figure out how to support their understanding using instructional aids like the whiteboard, demonstrations, and gestures. When I give instructions and the activity begins, sometimes I can see that my instructional aids are working well for JLLs in the class, but there are times when it depends on students, and the instructional aids are not working. When I reflect on the lesson at the end of the class, I check and analyse my worksheet. I sometimes realize that the lesson and instructional aids were not well matched and did not help JLLs. On the other hand, there are moments in class when I feel like, "okay, it worked well." Or sometimes, I should break up tasks into smaller tasks to help JLLs understand better. So, it is getting better, but I often notice that there are some improvements when I teach lessons. (Mr. Kuraki's interviews)

Mr. Kuraki believed that it is important to be able to use a variety of instructional aids such as whiteboard diagrams, modeling demonstrations, and gestures, because this allows him to select an instructional aid best suited to meeting JLLs' unique needs. He felt that he needs to improve his use of instructional aids in some situations, such as when JLLs stopped moving, checked other peers' behaviors and actions, or made sequencing errors. Mr. Kuraki focused on monitoring his JLLs and found that they may need a different level of support depending on behaviors and actions in the class. Another participant, Mr. Oda, had experience teaching overseas in the past. He believed that this experience helped him to have empathy for JLLs, and that such empathy is important for developing his caring actions and behaviors for working with JLLs. He said that:

> When I was teaching overseas, I did not understand the local language and I remember how stressful it was when people kept talking to me. Now I could understand JLLs' feelings and their anxiety in PE class. I try to minimize JLLs' anxiety as much as possible, so I stay close to JLLs, and use simple English language, visual materials, gestures, or sometimes do the activity together with them. In order to understand JLLs' emotions such as enjoyment or boredom, it is better to use instructional aids (e.g. emotion mood cards). I care about JLLs' sense of belonging as a part of the group. Once they begin to increase their comfort zone, I gradually step back and let their peers take over. It is important that teachers and students have some type of empathy. I think if I did not have the opportunity to teach overseas, I would not be able to understand how JLLs feel in the class. (Mr. Oda's interviews)

Mr. Oda believed that instructional aids, such as visual and/or audio materials used to check JLLs' emotional understanding, may be used to identify students' comfort zones and motivation in PE. Instructional aids function as reflection tools that allow teachers to monitor learners' understanding and make decisions about whether or not to modify or adjust their instruction (McNicol et al., 2014). More specifically, in PE, Berkey and Cool (1993) used the term "strategy of checking for understanding" to refer both to questions posed to students that identify a "low level identification" of student (JLL) knowledge and to self-posed question for the teacher. This study found that, in Mr. Oda's view, it is not enough to check for comprehension of lesson instructions when teaching JLLs in PE classes; he also needs to check JLLs' emotions and make sure that they actively, socially, and emotionally participate in the activities. Al-Jarrah et al. (2024) explain that emotions are experienced by both teachers and language learners in relation to communication development and physical skills. Therefore, teachers play a critical role in facilitating the teaching and learning process, as they have a substantial impact on JLLs' motivation for learning and students' academic achievement (Rienties & Rivers, 2014). Mr. Oda recognized the importance of teachers' empathy, or their ability to understand and resonate with their JLLs'

emotional experiences, which has emerged as a vital component in fostering positive learning outcomes in PE (Ampofo et al., 2025).

Mr. Oda believed that it is important that teachers understand JLLs' emotional cues. As Harré and van Langenhove (1999) explain, teachers who recognize and respond to students' emotional states (e.g., anxiety, joy, frustration) can better adapt their teaching practices and foster a supportive environment. One effective strategy is using Emoji, which are two-dimensional pictographs that support expressive communication and offer important communicative affordances that can enrich learning interactions (Dirgeyasa, 2022). The teachers may be able to use such tools to capture emotional nuances, reduce misunderstanding, and facilitate motivation in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Theme III: teachers' dilemmas concerning equity- and equality-based assessment and evaluation for JLLs

This theme captured the dilemmas participants faced when assessing and evaluating JLLs' motor skills. They were unsure whether they should use the same assessment rubrics for JLLs as for Japanese students. In other words, they continuously negotiated between equity- and equality-based assessment and evaluation approaches and tried to balance two different concepts of fairness: standards-based or effort-based assessment.

For example, some JLLs lacked some of the academic and psychomotor backgrounds that were assumed of Japanese students in middle schools. The participants understood that JLLs struggled to perform certain motor skills partly because of cultural differences and limited experience with those skills. Although the teachers actively negotiated between equality- and equity-based assessment and evaluation, some ultimately positioned themselves as evaluators rather than supporters (Davies & Harré, 1990). They believed that providing differentiated criteria or accommodations could be seen as unfair "special treatment" or even unethical actions (Hay & Penney, 2012). For example, Mr. Okabe explained:

> Due to their different cultural backgrounds, JLLs were not familiar with certain motor skills. For example, when I assessed swimming performance, some JLLs did flutter kicks without alternating motions or pointed toes, so I needed to deduct some points. I am talking about motor skills, but assessment is not only about skills. I would like to assess and evaluate JLLs' performance based on their efforts and improvement. I have a dilemma between equality- and equity-based assessment and evaluation for JLLs in PE. I think that if JLLs do not perform well during the assessment, there is nothing I can do. Plus, if my JLLs do not understand Japanese, they do not know whether they are following the assessment protocol appropriately or not. Language differences significantly influence their performance. I am afraid that Japanese students would judge me if I give special and extra treatment for JLLs in PE. (Mr. Okabe's interview)

Mr. Okabe explained that applying the national curriculum standards in PE could position JLLs as low-achieving students. To address this, he considered modifying the assessment to emphasize JLLs' improvement in motor skills. However, he was concerned that such adjustments may be perceived as unfair by Japanese students. Although he believed that protecting JLLs from a disadvantaged position should be a priority, he felt this was difficult to achieve in terms of assessment and evaluation could be perceived as unfair and might lead to accusations of favoritism by Japanese students in PE classes (Hay & Penney, 2012). Penney (2002) argued that teachers' dilemmas in PE are affected by the interrelationship of

equality, equity, and inclusion, which together create complex challenges in designing fair and effective learning environments. Teachers must navigate the tension between ensuring that all students are offered the same opportunities (equality), providing individualized support so that diverse learners can succeed (equity), and creating a welcoming environment where every student feels valued regardless of their background or ability (inclusion) (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024).

PE teachers' positioning and evaluation-related decision making have become ongoing issues of concern in Japan. Teachers' judgments are often influenced by their subjective and unconscious cognitive biases regarding curriculum and assessment practices (Sato et al., 2022). As a result, they frequently struggle with grading in middle schools, particularly because they experience strong pressure to prepare students for highly competitive high school entrance exams (Kameda, 2025). More specifically, Kameda (2025) explains that the final year of compulsory education places considerable pressure on teachers due to increased academic and behavioral expectations and heightened stress associated with preparing students for their post-compulsory education pathways. Under these systemic conditions, teachers tend to perceive equality-oriented assessment as both legitimate and necessary, even when such practices inadvertently create disadvantages for JLLs. For example, Mr. Matsui described his assessment practices in PE class:

> I felt that there are many JLLs who do not receive positive assessment results because they had difficulty following directions due to language differences. I am teaching middle school, this is the last year of compulsory education, so JLLs need to have good grades in PE when they decide to take entrance exams for high schools. So, I tell JLLs that their final grades in PE can strongly influence their future education. I try to encourage JLLs to get better grades. I am here to help and support them, but I cannot bend my standards. Sometimes, I feel disappointed that JLLs could not meet my expectations even though they worked hard. It hurts me emotionally sometimes, but in the last year of middle school, I need to assess and evaluate students equally. (Mr. Matsui's interview)

Mr. Matsui believed that, by positioning himself as an evaluator for students' further education rather than as a supporter, he had effectively chosen a forced other-position for himself (Davies & Harré, 1990). This created a relationship where the teacher and JLLs are on opposite sides, rather than working together as a team, especially in the final year of compulsory education (middle schools). Therefore, teachers may consider adopting a more supportive role to foster intrinsic motivation and a positive learning environment, as support is linked to improved student engagement, connectedness, and a sense of well-being (Narayanan et al., 2024).

This study also identified an exceptional case in which, when grading first and second year middle school students, including JLLs, teachers emphasized effort and student growth and showed increasing flexibility in determining JLLs' grades. For example, Mr. Kuraki explained that assessment should be used to motivate JLLs by making learning goals clear and providing timely, informative feedback to guide their progress in PE. He said that:

> In my assessment, I believe that students should not be evaluated only on what they cannot do, but also on how much effort they make and how they engage in learning. For example, in the first and second year of middle school, my students do not need to prepare for entrance examinations. Grading is important, but I can take a more flexible approach in order to acknowledge students' efforts and improvement. However, one thing I am careful about is the need for evidence-based assessment data and having grading that incorporates students'

> effort. Without giving my rationale why the effort is important, I do not think I can justify my position. For example, when I assess students' effort, I collect various data from worksheets, classroom behavioral assessment, active participation and improvement. I use cognitive, psychomotor, and social criteria of assessment. I also modify the assessment format. For example, some JLLs struggle to read and write in Japanese, so I may use some types of communication support for enhancing their learning. I believe that assessment should not be used to understand JLLs' learning outcomes, but to seek potential ways to help JLLs find sport and physical activity opportunities. We need to have some types of workshops regarding modification and adjustment of assessment for JLLs. (Mr. Kuraki's interview)

Interpreting Mr. Kuraki's views and justification regarding assessment and evaluation for JLLs using the lens of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), Mr. Kuraki focused on how he constructed his identity through social interactions with JLLs by accepting, challenging, and rejecting his own positions regarding his roles and responsibilities as a PE teacher. Accordingly, he believed that it is important to critically analyze his existing positionings and modify assessment and evaluation strategies to create positions that are more supportive and empowering of JLLs. This study suggests that teachers such as Mr. Kuraki need to work collaboratively with specialists in second language acquisition or linguistics to design assessment manuals in PE (Tomura et al., 2024). For example, Mr. Kuraki could work with such specialists to develop a portfolio assessment in PE for JLLs. Portfolios can be used to collect tangible evidence of students' learning by accumulating various samples of students' work that demonstrate progress and mastery of skills over time (Abrar-Ul-Hassan et al., 2021). Portfolio assessment differs from traditional assessment in that it covers the learning experiences of JLLs throughout an entire semester, providing evidence of learning at different stages of the course (Abrar-Ul-Hassan & Douglas, 2020). This type of assessment reflects JLLs' development through physical artifacts like action shots, video clips, or completed skill checklists, as well as student reflections on their growth.

Study limitations

This study had two primary limitations. First, the sample size was small. Including more participants could provide a deeper understanding of Japanese middle school teachers' unique experiences that influence their positioning in teaching PE to JLLs. Nevertheless, qualitative inquiries typically use small samples to reveal themes that explain and describe complex social/educational phenomena (Patton, 2014). Second, participants were drawn exclusively from the public schools in a urban area. Including teachers from a more diverse range of suburban or rural regions could enable cross-case analysis, potentially providing critical insights through comparison of different cases (Tomura et al., 2025b).

Conclusions

This study explored Japanese PE teachers' positioning in teaching JLLs in middle school PE classes. Drawing on positioning theory, the findings indicate that Japanese PE teachers struggle to balance their roles and responsibilities as both teachers and facilitators, as well as evaluators and supporters of JLLs' learning. More specifically, these teachers reported unique struggles due to communication difficulties, cultural differences in norms and

practices, and specific challenges related to assessment and the institutional pressures of the modern educational system (Tomura et al., 2024).

To help reduce the complex behavioral, emotional, and instructional challenges of Japanese physical education teachers, school districts may need to organize workshops and provide teachers with professional development that improves their cultural competency and support the adoption of alternative assessment strategies such as portfolio assessment. This study also recommends that schools consider and create supplemental instructional materials regarding pedagogical approaches, instructional aids, and assessments that enhance the quality of instruction and strengthen teachers' capacity to meet JLLs' unique needs in PE settings. Given the paucity of research in this area, it is important to continue investigating these issues not only in Japan but also in other countries facing similar educational and linguistic challenges.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Momoka Ikeshita:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Takahiro Sato:** Funding acquisition, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ryan T. Miller:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – review & editing; **Chie Kataoka:** Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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