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## **“Making it your own by adapting it to what’s important to you”: Plurilingual Critical Literacies to Promote L2 Japanese Users’ Sense of Ownership of Japanese**

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## **“Making it your own by adapting it to what’s important to you”: Plurilingual Critical Literacies to promote L2 Japanese users’ sense of ownership of Japanese**

**Noriko Iwasaki and Yuri Kumagai**

**Abstract** The increasing mobility and visible multilingualism of society today make ownership of any named language a matter of contention. Yet the dichotomy between native speaker and non-native speaker remains ubiquitous across different language learning contexts. L2 Japanese learners in particular may find themselves positioned as subordinate to native speakers because of the myth of Japan being a homogenous nation of one race and one language. To help L2 Japanese students counter such positioning, we implemented “plurilingual critical literacies”—a plurilingual approach informed by critical literacy—in a Japanese language course at a U.S. college. Critical literacy aims to cultivate students’ awareness that power relationships are implicated in language use, and plurilingual pedagogy valorizes students’ multilingual resources. We argue that this combined approach can potentially help students gain a sense of ownership of language, which is a crucial component of language learning.

Eleven high intermediate-level Japanese students of mixed cultural background participated. They read and discussed authentic texts by transcultural or “culturally mobile” writers (Dagnino 2015), examining how the transcultural writers expressed resistance to the status quo and made meaning creatively, as mediators between two languages/cultures. Students mobilized their linguistic and cultural resources in their discussions and textual analysis. We found that reading, analyzing, and discussing texts by transcultural writers motivated students to counter ideologies of native versus non-native speaker, and to own Japanese in the ways that best suit their transcultural identities.

**KEYWORDS:** ownership, Japanese as a foreign language, critical literacy, translingual writer, plurilingualism, translanguaging

### **1 Introductions**

The apparent ownership of a language by its native speakers, the dichotomy between native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS), and the asymmetric power relation between these speakers in second/foreign language (L2/FL) instruction have long been problematized (e.g. Canagarajah 1999; Cook 1999; Kramsch 1997; Norton 1997; Widdowson 1994). Most of these works are in the context of English as L2 or lingua franca (see Doerr 2009 for Japanese contexts).

Asymmetric power relations between NSs and NNSs are particularly pronounced in Japanese as FL contexts. This is because Japanese as FL contexts rely more on teachers (often NSs) and textbooks than do Japanese as L2 contexts in Japan. In Japanese textbooks, the unequal NS-NNS power relationship is particularly evident in the portrayal of Japanese learners (Kumagai 2014): Japanese is presented as a difficult language, and its users are often “given admonitions” as to how or how

not to use the language (Heinrich 2005). Learners are often characterized “in a childish way,” or as “enthusiastic, ignorant, and submissive” people (Heinrich 2005, 221).

The linkage between ownership of the Japanese language and its NSs is reinforced by a pervasive myth of Japan as a homogeneous nation populated by a homogeneous ethnic group whose language is so unique that it is impossible for non-Japanese to learn it (cf. Befu 2009; R. Miller 1977). This myth, known as *Nihonjinron* (Theory of the Japanese), gained popularity in the 1980s due to a nationalistic endeavor to maintain Japanese identity at a time of rapid internationalization (Befu 1983). Scholars of Japanese studies today regard this “theory” as somewhat obsolete, but it remains ubiquitous in the public consciousness (see, e.g., a special section on “The Politics of Speaking Japanese” in L. Miller [2015]).

Along with *Nihonjinron*, the concept of *kokugo*, “national language,” was invented in the late 19th century for the purpose of nation building. The construction of a national language has influenced the way Japanese language education is conducted. According to Tai (2003, 10), *kokugo* was conceptualized by Ueda (1968) as “the essence of what made up the Japanese.” In this line of thought, only ethnic Japanese are capable of learning the imagined unified language *kokugo*, while *nihongo*, the Japanese language that foreigners acquire, is expected to be deviant (Tanaka and Komagome 1999; Tai 2003). Hence, L2 Japanese users may find themselves positioned subordinately, or even excluded from legitimate membership of the linguistic community, as perpetually “deficient” (Cook 1999) language users.

The view of language behind *Nihonjinron* and *kokugo* assumes the NS’s first language (L1) is a stable, complete system. This runs counter to multicompetence (e.g., Cook 1992), an increasingly acknowledged concept of language competence in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). From the view of multicompetence, the L1 and L2 are merged in the L2 users’ mind, producing a system of mind that differs from that of monolinguals’ of either the L1 or the L2 (Cook 2016). This SLA concept aligns with the pedagogical approach adopted in this chapter, and serves as a key to help students of Japanese as FL confront monolingual biases and NS supremacy, and gain a sense of ownership in using Japanese.

The view of language as fluid and non-bounded is still not widely welcomed in FL education, as the very idea has potential to threaten the core mission of teaching a named foreign language. In FL education, a monolingual approach that encourages or allows use of only the target language is a norm upheld in the name of creating a pseudo-immersion context. However, this approach does not nurture students’ agency or identity as future cultural mediators. FL education needs to shift its goal of language and literacy teaching, from that of equipping learners with knowledge of language (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) and communication skills, and toward learners’ realization of the importance of enlisting all the linguistic and cultural resources they possess— plurilingual/pluricultural competencies—that contribute to their engagement as cultural mediators in increasingly diverse societies.

## 2 The Current Study

To aid L2 learners to challenge being positioned as subordinate, we implemented a curriculum informed by critical literacy in a third-year Japanese language course at a private women’s college in the United States in the spring of 2011. Our goals were to

help students reflect upon (1) ownership of language, and (2) the persistent NS-NNS power relations in the Japanese as FL context as well as other contexts.

### ***2.1 Critical Literacy in FL***

Critical literacy, based on a sociocultural theory of language, is a pedagogical approach that is particularly concerned with teaching learners to understand and manage the relationship between language and power (Janks 2000). It underscores the importance of cultivating students' "critical language awareness" (Fairclough 2010) and recognizing power relations that writers create through the use of language. Recognizing that "all texts are positioned by the writer's point of view, and the linguistic (and other semiotic) choices made by the writer are designed to produce effects that position the reader" (Janks, 2010, 61), critical literacy uses linguistic analysis of a text, especially in relation to its genre and the writer's purpose in writing it, to help learners understand how writers shape their messages for particular readers in order to accomplish certain aims (Pennycook 2001). As Lemke (1995, 1) puts it: "The meanings we make define not only ourselves, they also define our communities...and our era in history." In other words, meanings created through texts are historically, socioculturally, and ideologically contextualized. Understanding the historical, sociocultural, and political background of texts is therefore crucial to readers' critical engagement in texts.

There exist various approaches in critical literacy. They are usually concerned with L1 education. Critical literacy has to some extent been adapted for teaching English as L2, but it has very seldom been applied in the FL context and even less so in languages other than English. This is primarily because critical engagement with texts is particularly challenging for FL readers: they are reading a text written for a writer's imagined audience/community, but that audience is not one they identify with (Kramersch 1993; Wallace 2003). Not only do FL readers have to interpret the text from the perspectives of the writer and the imagined reader, but they must also interpret the text from the view of their own and other familiar communities. To accomplish this complex task, we argue, FL readers need to mobilize their multiple linguistic and cultural repertoires (Kumagai and Iwasaki 2016).

### ***2.2 Valorizing Students' Repertoires and Promoting Mobilization of Their Resources***

In FL learning, it is important to develop not just knowledge of and proficiency in a particular target language/culture, but also students' ability to draw upon all the languages/cultures they know in order to achieve understanding. Several pedagogical approaches, such as the pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group 1996, 2000), plurilingual/pluricultural pedagogy (e.g., Coste et al. 2009; Marshall and Moore 2018), translanguaging (e.g., García and Li Wei 2014), and the translingual approach (e.g., Canagarajah 2007, 2013; MLA Ad Hoc Committee 2007; Kramersch 2011), encourage learners to mobilize all available semiotic resources. These approaches have been developed and practiced in different disciplines (L1 education, L2/FL education, bilingual education, and ESL writing/FL education, respectively),

so they take (slightly) different views of how meaning is created by individual cognitive processes or social practices.

Still, all these approaches share the fundamental theoretical position that language is fluid and non-bounded, rather than being “a thing in itself, an objective, identifiable product” (Canagarajah 2007, 98). Pennycook (2017, 129), quoting Canagarajah (2013, 6), explains two concepts that are key to understanding these approaches:

On the one hand, “communication transcends individual languages,” that is to say, we use repertoires of linguistic resources without necessary recourse to the notions of languages; and on the other hand, “communication transcends words and involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances,” that is to say, we draw on a wide set of possible resources to achieve communication.

The notion of multiliteracies proposed by the New London Group (1996) also challenges the traditional notion of “language” as a sole means of communication and recognizes individuals’ multiple languages as resources. This notion of multiliteracies centers around two principal aspects of multiplicity: “the multifarious cultures that [are] interrelated and the plurality of texts that circulate” in our culturally and linguistically diverse society, and the “burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (New London Group, 2000, 9). That individuals’ resources include multiple languages and cultures is acknowledged thusly:

When learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substantively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions (New London Group 2000, 15).

The benefits of linguistic and cultural repertoires stemming from multiple languages and cultures are also recognized and promoted by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). CEFR has been very influential in Japanese language education as well, especially after the Japan Foundation (established under the jurisdiction of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote Japanese language and culture abroad) published the CEFR-based *JF Standards for Japanese-Language Education 2010*, which is now a reference used by Japanese teachers the world over.

CEFR distinguishes “multilingualism,” meaning the coexistence of different languages in a given society, from “plurilingualism,” used to refer to the promotion of individuals’ competences. The competences derived from an individual’s linguistic/cultural resources are plurilingual/pluricultural competences (Council of Europe 2001, 4), described below:

...the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental

compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. In different situations, a person can call flexibly upon different parts of this competence to achieve effective communication with a particular interlocutor.

Mediation between languages and cultures is a plurilingual/pluricultural individuals' quintessential capacity that can be realized as interpretation or translation of language and culture. "Translation" activities are also essential in plurilingual pedagogy, as they allow students to use their plurilingual resources to construct and deepen their knowledge.

Translanguaging has attracted considerable attention in the field of bilingual education. Baker (2011, 288) defines translanguaging as "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, understandings and knowledge through the use of two languages through the use of two languages." Originally coined from a Welsh term used to refer to English-Welsh bilingual pedagogical practice, the term is now used in reference to plurilingual individuals' and communities' language practice, as well as to pedagogical approaches. Translation as the practice of rendering one language into another can be considered one specific way of practicing translanguaging (Stathopoulou 2015). Translanguaging as a pedagogical approach is used "to valorize and promote pride in students' ethnolinguistic identities" (Sayer 2008, 110). The teacher participates as a learner rather than an authority (García and Li Wei 2014, 94), and "co-learning" is achieved via the contributions of both teacher and students (Li Wei 2014).

We understand all these approaches as sharing two core principles: recognizing the value of wide-ranging repertoires of semiotic resources, and promoting the mobilization of those resources to achieve communication. We adopt these shared principles in our "plurilingual critical literacies" (Sect. 2.4–2.6) in the Japanese as FL classroom.

### **2.3 Participants**

The lesson unit from Iwasaki and Kumagai (2015) on texts written by "transcultural writers" (defined in Sect. 2.5) was implemented in the second half of a third-year (upper intermediate) Japanese language course at a women's liberal arts college in the spring of 2011. Of the 11 female students were enrolled in the course, 7 were European-American, 1 Hispanic-American, 2 Korean-American, and 1 Rwandan-American. Table 1 shows their profiles. In the fourth column, the student's L1 is given first; languages learned subsequently are listed in parentheses. The institutional protocol for ethical consideration was carefully followed. All students were informed of the general research purpose (i.e., to understand students' experience of learning to read authentic Japanese texts) and procedures, and signed a consent form detailing the collection of data via audio recording of in-class discussions and photocopying of writing assignments and other artifacts (i.e., homework and essays, including those on exams). Students were also informed that individual interviews might be conducted once the course ended.

**Table 1** Student Profiles

Name	School Year	Major (Minor)	Language Background (Languages learned as FL)
Lisa	4	Engineering (Japanese)	English
Sonia	3	Japanese, Geology	English, Spanish (Italian)
Sue	3	Japanese	English, Korean
Sook	4	Biology	English, Korean (Spanish)
Erin	3	Biochemistry (Japanese)	English (French)
Angelina	4	Japanese	English
Amy	3	Japanese, Computer Science	English
Faye	4	Computer Science	English
Genni	3	Economics (Japanese)	Kinyarwanda, English
Katey	2	Neuroscience (Japanese)	English
Carol	4	Japanese	English

### **2.4 Course Design**

The second author implemented a curriculum designed by both authors; she is experienced in pedagogy adopting critical literacy (e.g., Iwasaki and Kumagai 2008; Kumagai 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Kumagai and Iwasaki 2011, 2016). The course had three parts. Part 1 was devoted to fiction, Part 2 to newspaper articles, and Part 3 to essays. The class met for 70 minutes three times a week. What we report on here took place in Part 3, in which the students read (among others) essays by Hideo Levy and then Donald Keene. Three and four class meetings were spent on each essay respectively.

Setting aside the monolingual approach commonly taken in FL classrooms, the course took the plurilingual approach, encouraging students to enlist all linguistic and cultural resources to make meaning. In Part 2, for example, one unit was spent to compare American and Japanese newspapers' online reports on the same incident, respectively headlined "4 US Teenagers Arrested in Japan" and "米兵の子 4 人を殺人未遂容疑で逮捕" [4 children of US military personnel arrested, suspected of attempted murder]. As plurilingual readers, students drew upon their knowledge of both the societies of the imagined target audiences and their languages (Japanese and English) to analyze the texts. Through this, they developed "critical language awareness" (Fairclough, 2010) of how writers create different tones and impressions of an incident by selecting particular words and expressions, grammatical forms, and information (Kumagai and Iwasaki 2016).

In addition, inspired by Kern's (2000) suggestions for literacy-based language teaching, we provided ample opportunities for speaking and writing related to the text. For example, before reading each text, students were introduced to background information about the writer and the text in order to situate the text in its sociocultural, historical, and political context. After confirming their understanding of the general content of each essay, the students discussed the writer's choices of words, textual structure, and writing systems (i.e., the use of *hiragana*, *katakana*, *kanji*, *Romaji*)<sup>1</sup> and then turned to focus on the ideas and messages expressed in the texts. One of the students' writing tasks was to compose a text in the genre of the text they had just read (or a similar genre) using newly learned genre-specific expressions or discourse styles for a specified target audience.

## 2.5 Two Texts

L2 Japanese language textbooks designed for upper levels often adhere to traditionally defined "authentic" texts, that is, texts produced by NSs for a NS audience. To counter this tendency, the classroom sessions we examine in this chapter concerned essays written in Japanese by authors who may be called "transcultural writers": the novelist Hideo Levy and the scholar-translator Donald Keene, who were both born in the U.S. Dagnino (2015, p. 1) defines transcultural writers as

...imaginative writers who, by choice or because of life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, follow transnational life patterns, cultivate bilingual or plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures, geographies, or territories, expose themselves to diversity, and nurture plural, flexible identities.

Levy, in his essay collection *Nihongo-o kaku heya* [The room where I write Japanese] (Levy 2001), discusses the issue of ownership of language in a piece titled "Nihongo no Shoyuiken-o megutte" [On ownership of the Japanese language]. He cynically applauds Japanese as a great language and presents the notion of "the victory of Japanese language," which for him signifies the emergence of Japanese-language writers who do not possess Japanese ethnicity or nationality, contrary to the ideology of one language, race, culture, and nationality. Keene writes about aspects of Japanese literature that are difficult to translate into English in "Yakushi gatai mono" [What I find difficult to translate], an essay in his collection *Futatsu-no sokoku-ni ikite* [Living in two homelands] (Keene, 1987).

Unlike the texts in the textbooks examined by Heinrich (2005), the texts written by acclaimed expert Japanese users of non-Japanese origin demonstrate their appropriation of the Japanese language. Levy (rather sarcastically) hails today's Japanese as a language that transcends the ideology that deprives non-Japanese of access to its ownership. Keene discusses his experience with the challenges of translating, an activity that monolingual speakers are incapable of. Translation is

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese utilizes four writing systems. E.g., the word *kaban* 'bag' can be written as 鞆 (kanji, Chinese character), かばん (hiragana), カバン (katakana), or kaban (Romaji).



possible because of plurilingual/pluricultural individuals' quintessential capacity to mediate between two languages/cultures.

These two essays were chosen to encourage students to reflect critically on the commonly held assumption that conflates "Japanese language" with "Japanese people" and "the nation of Japan," to develop their sense of ownership of the Japanese language as a linguistic resource that is theirs to claim, and to make meaning. The texts' authors likely imagined a target audience of Japanese NSs. Reading a text by a writer whose community is closer to their own (as opposed to most of the authentic texts read in the Japanese classroom) may have facilitated the students' interpretation of the text from the writer's viewpoint, as well as their reinterpretation of it from their own community's perspective. The students also had opportunities to discuss the significance of writing a text in a language other than their L1, particularly in a language that, like Japanese, has a limited audience.

## ***2.6 Implementation of Plurilingual Critical Literacies Pedagogy***

We instructed students to consider both the writer's imagined audience and the social purposes of writing the piece as they read and analyzed each text, and encouraged them to reflect on their own experiences. The students examined how the transcultural writers expressed such views as resistance to the status quo. For example, they discussed the intention behind Levy's deliberate use of a non-normative expression, *nihongo-o motteiru* ('possessing Japanese'), to highlight his claim to ownership of Japanese.

The classroom activities took an approach that encouraged students to use any linguistic and cultural resources available to them to enhance their plurilingual/pluricultural competences. They mobilized these resources, using English and Japanese in discussions and referring also to other applicable linguistic and cultural resources. For example, before reading Keene's essay on aspects of Japanese literature that are difficult to translate—which describes episodes in the translating of Yukio Mishima's work—the students compared a paragraph from Mishima's original (in Japanese) with Keene's English translation. They also talked about the different images and meanings animals and plants evoke across cultures (illustrated in Sect. 3.1), which Keene discusses in his text. Their reflections extended to issues of identity, language ideology, the ownership of language, and translation.

## ***2.7 Data and the Foci of Analyses***

We utilize three datasets for purposes of triangulation. In addition to audio-recorded classroom interactions and the students' end-of-semester writings, semi-structured retrospective interviews (in English) were conducted with five students who were available and willing to participate. The interviews, which were audio-recorded, took place after the grades for the course were submitted. The audio recordings of the classroom interactions and interviews were transcribed.

Right after reading Levy's and Keene's texts, students capped the semester by writing reflective essays on those texts as part of the final exam, according to the following prompt (the English translation follows):

あなたは日本語を勉強してきて、自分の文化や言語、日本の文化や言語について、今、どんな考えをもっていますか。リービ英雄の考え（例えば「日本語の所有権」や「日本語の勝利」）やドナルド・キーンの翻訳の苦勞を読んで、自分が日本語を学ぶことや使うことについてどんなことを考えましたか。外国語を勉強したことがない人に自分の考えを伝えるつもりで書きなさい。

How has your thought about cultures and languages (your own and Japanese) evolved through learning Japanese? What did you think about learning and using Japanese language by reading ideas put forth by Hideo Levy (e.g., “ownership of the Japanese language”, “victory of Japanese language”) or the difficulties of translation narrated by Donald Keene? Write your essay as if to communicate your thoughts to people who have never studied a foreign language.

The data were analyzed in order to understand

- (1) the nature of plurilingual/pluricultural practices in the class interaction and ways they might have affected power relations in the classroom and students’ learning;
- (2) students’ understanding of what “owning a language” means, and their own sense of ownership of Japanese.

The students were not “taught” or given any specifically defined ideas of “ownership” of language, apart from discussing and interpreting Levy Hideo’s arguments related to it. Our interest was to explore the students’ ideas of language ownership, which may have been newly constructed based on their reading activities and discussions in addition to prior experiences.

### **3 Findings**

#### ***3.1 Classroom Interaction***

We examined classroom interactions in order to illustrate plurilingual/pluricultural practice and understand its possible effects. Students seemed relaxed throughout the sessions, due partly to the small class size and more importantly to the already established rapport among all participants (including the teacher), who have been studying Japanese together for two to three years. Both teacher and students freely used English when they wished to clarify their thoughts or express complex ideas. The students found both texts rather challenging, but the teacher helped the students understand them by asking questions about the texts (e.g., about words or expressions) and providing English equivalents whenever she felt they would be helpful.

In his essay, Levy discusses the recent “victory” of Japanese language, which non-Japanese at last use (and hence own) for creative expression, asserting that the question of victory is not relevant to the Chinese and Korean languages. The teacher encouraged students to contribute to the discussion by reflecting on their experience and understanding of their other languages and cultures. In response to a question the

teacher asked about Korean people and their attitude to language, several of the students exchanged their views as follows.<sup>2</sup>

#### Class Interaction Excerpt 1

Sook: Oh, in Korea, like, in terms of Japanese colonization, their language was something that they identified as like a part of their identity but then, like, I think now, these days, like, I met Korean people who are very very very very very very nationalistic about Korea to the point of soooo annoying...

SS: (laughter)

Sook: ...and, but then, like, when it comes to language, like I think, you know, in Japan, foreigners go and speak Japanese and usually, not all of them, but usually Japanese would reply back in English. In Korea, if a foreigner goes to Korea and starts speaking in Korean, usually Korean people would be like “Ooooh, you speak Korean,” and they speak Korean back. So like I think in that

Faye: It’s different [kind of nationalism isn’t it?]

S: [And that]

Sook: Yeah, it’s not, yeah, it’s not like they are like

S: [inaudible]

S: [inaudible]

Sue: [They don’t, they don’t, they don’t, it’s, it’s], it’s very different because, um, language is a part of national identity but it’s also something that they want other people to learn.

Referring to their own experiences and mobilizing other resources in a safe classroom space, the students’ discussion of potentially sensitive topics of Japanese colonization led to a highly engaged sequence of turn-taking. Sook observed that the Korean language is strongly linked to Koreans’ national identity and yet foreigners in Korea are encouraged to learn and use the language.

The students agreed that main message of Levy’s essay was resistance to the ideology of linking Japanese language with Japanese people, and one student (Lisa) noted that it was significant that Levy wrote the essay in Japanese: “*chotto komento-ga arimasu ga, a, Levy-san-wa nihongo-de kaita kara, sore-wa juuyoo da to omoimasu*” [I have a comment about this, um, because Levy wrote this in Japanese, I think it is important]. Her comment indicates her heightened awareness of who Levy’s imagined target audience is and what his intentions were in writing the essay.

Students’ linguistic and cultural resources were also mobilized in the sessions discussing Keene’s essay. Below, spontaneous translation is used when the teacher refers to a Japanese expression “*atama-o itameta* (I had my head ache)” that Keene used when describing the challenge of translating Yukio Mishima’s novel “*Utage-no ato* (After the Banquet)”. In the excerpts below, the Japanese utterances are in italics and the English equivalents of the Japanese utterances are given in parentheses. The brackets indicate overlaps of utterances.

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<sup>2</sup> In the transcripts of classroom exchanges, T indicates the teacher, S indicates an unidentifiable student, and SS indicates multiple students. Square brackets indicate overlapping of utterances.

### Class Interaction Excerpt 2

T: *demo, soo ne* (but well) give me a headache but that's metaphorical *desyo* (isn't it?) [*Doo iu imi?* (what does it mean?)]

Erin: [Yeah, it's the same in English so].

Faye: Yeah, English has the same meaning.

T: *Ja, doo yakushitara ii, kore?* (Then how do you translate this?) <Reading a sentence in the text aloud> “*Watashi-wa nihon-no shokubutsu-no eiyaku-de atama-o itameta koto-wa nankaimo aru*” How do you translate? *Doo suru?* (How do you do it?)

Faye: So, so it's um, even the translating the, the, um, what's the

T: plants?

Faye: the plant names into English gives me a headache any number of times, um

Though used only a few times in the seven class sessions, spontaneous translation—a quintessential plurilingual activity, as mentioned earlier—can help students activate their existing knowledge of languages to learn and use a target language (for the role of spontaneous translation in language learning, see González Davis 2014). By translating a phrase from Japanese to English, students confirmed that a particular metaphorical expression in Japanese, a language often regarded as entirely different from English, is very similar to its English counterpart. If not for the translation activity, they might not have realized how readily applicable their English resources could be (albeit not always).

Keene further discusses another challenge in translation, that is, the various culturally dependent connotations and images associated with some insects and animals. The students discussed their own images and associations with the insects and animals that Keene mentioned in the text (e.g., dragonfly, moth, owl). One of the students, Lisa, then became curious and asked about a crow. Below, English words or expressions used in Japanese utterances are marked in bold.

### Class Interaction Excerpt 3

Lisa: *Nihon de **crow** wa donna imeeji desu ka?* (What images does a crow have in Japan?)

T: *Karasu? Karasu wa totemo fukitsu.* (Crow? Crows are ominous.) It's an evil.

Lisa: Ok.

SS: Oh yes.

Lisa: Oh bad luck, bad luck, *onaji, onaji.* (same here, same here)

Erin: It's kind of funny that the same, like, image comes up in different places.

T: *Amerika de kuroneko wa, mo, **bad luck** desyo?* (In the US, black cats also signify bad luck, don't they?)

SS: Yeah.

Erin: *Hikkoshi de sabetsu **against**.* (When relocating/moving, there is discrimination against them.)

Lisa: *Kuroneko no, a: ue, a: mae ni **like** mae ni aruite* (Um, you walk above, uh, in front of a black cat...)

T: *a...*

Lisa: *arukuto* (if you walk)  
 T: **bad luck**, *soo desu ne. Kuroneko tte bad, bad luck. Kankoku de bad luck ja nai desyo?* (Bad luck, right. Black cats are <associated with> bad luck. In Korea, they are not bad luck, are they?)  
 Sook: *un, un.* (yes, yes.)  
 T: *Nihon de mo daijoobu. hai.* (It is fine in Japanese too, yes)  
 Genni: *Ruwanda de, a, kesa kuroneko o miru to* (In Rwanda, if you see a black cat this morning), whole days are gonna be bad luck.  
 SS: Oh.  
 T: *A, Ruwanda de Ruwanda demo kuroneko wa bad luck?* (Ah, are black cats also considered bad luck in Rwanda?)  
 Genni: Especially like in the morning.  
 T: *asa, asa?* (morning, morning?)  
 Genni: *asa.* (morning)  
 T: *Asa miru to bad luck.* (If you see one in the morning, it's bad luck.)  
 Erin: What if you have a black cat, it's like every day is gonna be bad luck. (laughter)  
 T: I have a black cat.  
 SS: (laughter)

Lisa's question about crows led to a discussion about black cats. The students became aware that in different cultures animals sometimes have similar connotations, but they also confirmed differences.

All three class interaction excerpts show students' active use of their plurilingual/pluricultural resources. In Excerpt 1, Sook shares her knowledge and experience of another culture and society (South Korea), which allows her to compare how foreigners' use of the national language is positioned in Japan and in Korea. Excerpt 2 shows Faye actively engaged in a translation activity that was spontaneously suggested by the teacher. In Excerpt 3, the teacher and four students, each utilizing her own resources, make contributions to the group's understanding of similarities and differences between the images and superstitions linked to animals. In this interaction, the teacher learns from the students, and "co-learning" (Li Wei 2014) is achieved.

In addition to the established rapport, the opportunities for higher-level contribution to the discussion, made possible by plurilingual/pluricultural practice in Excerpts 1 and 3, suggest that power relations are minimized. The reduced power relation is also reflected in a series of students' utterances, often without prompts from the teacher in these interactions.

### 3.2 Written Reflections on Ownership of Language

Next we examine how the students viewed the notion of ownership at the end of the course. Their 1–2-page essays handwritten in Japanese were first checked to ensure that the students' reflections indeed related to the texts they read or the main topics discussed in the classes<sup>3</sup> (see the essay prompt in Section 2.7).

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the course, students expressed their views in writing assignments. They knew that their work would receive high marks regardless of their opinions as long as

Of the 11 students, two (Katey and Faye) made generic comments about learning Japanese and one (Angelina) described her experience and subjectivities in relation to her two languages (English and Japanese). Angelina, who in her own way had a strong sense of owning both languages, concluded her composition as follows.<sup>4</sup>

#### Essay Excerpt 1 (Angelina)

しかし、英語で話す私と日本語で話す私はそんなに違うかしら。それはそうわけではないと思う。2つの話し方は同両私のものなんだから、どちらでも使えば、私はまだ私だ。

(But I wonder if the ‘I’ who speaks English and the ‘I’ who speaks Japanese are so different. I do not think so. Both languages are mine. Regardless of which language I use, I am who I am.)

The other eight students reflected on issues related to the texts. With one exception, they believed that learners of Japanese as L2 can gain ownership if they work hard enough to become proficient in the language. However, many of them also believed this to be a very difficult task due to some aspects of the language, such as Japanese culture, *kanji* (Chinese characters), and *keigo* (honorifics).

The one student who did not appear to think L2 Japanese users can have ownership of the language, Erin, stated that Japanese is too difficult for a foreigner to learn. She compared it to French, another language she has learned: she thinks she could pass as an NS in France if she became proficient, especially because of her appearance. The difficulty seems to be especially associated with the need to learn the culture.

#### Essay Excerpt 2 (Erin)

日本には、外国人が日本語をしょゆうことになるは今からできませんと思います。文化的なことも習わなくてははいけません。

(I do not think foreigners can own the Japanese language in Japan at this time. One needs to learn cultural aspects too.)

Erin appears to accept the pervasive idea that Japanese is too difficult for L2 Japanese learners whose native language and culture differ greatly from Japan’s.

Like Erin, many students appear to equate ownership of (Japanese) language to mastery of the language; however, they seem to consider mastery attainable for L2 learners who make an effort. They see mastery as more than mere speaking proficiency. Sonia, who finds learning Japanese much more challenging than learning Italian, wrote as below.

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they responded to the question and demonstrated some self-reflection, considering their own personal experiences.

<sup>4</sup> In the excerpts from the students’ writing, non-target-like words, spelling, and sequences are retained, except for ill-formed characters (which cannot be typed). The English equivalents given below the Japanese text contain our best guesses of non-target-like expressions when the intended meanings are relatively transparent.

### Essay Excerpt 3 (Sonia)

日本人のようにペラペラ話せるのに、大切な教育のかんじが書け、読めなければ、日本語の所有権がなくて、まじめな日本語の学生と日本人にみなされないしまいます。

(Even if you can speak Japanese fluently like a Japanese person, if you cannot read and write kanji that is important in education, then you do not have ownership and are not regarded by Japanese people as a serious student learning Japanese.)

For Sonia, knowledge of kanji is indispensable to “a serious student” seeking ownership of the Japanese language.

Similarly, Sook, who has learned Spanish as L2, finds learning Japanese unexpectedly difficult. Speaking fluently does not suffice, she says.

### Essay Excerpt 4 (Sook)

文化を習うことをどりよくしなければ、どんなほどにその外国語を勉強しても、その外国語をわからなくて、「所有」ができないと思う。言葉を所有するのがペラペラ話せるやわかることもあるけど、私はそのことばのコンテキストや origin は重要があると考えている。

(I think that unless one makes efforts to learn the culture, no matter how hard they study a foreign language, they do not understand the language and cannot own it. Owning a language includes speaking fluently and comprehending, but I think that the context and the origin of the language are important.)

For Sook, the culture is what is important. Amy echoes this view of culture.

### Essay Excerpt 5 (Amy)

そして、文化の問題から、たぶん日本で生まれた、そだった人は日本語のしょうゆうけんを持っています。ほかの人はいっしょけんめいに勉強していて、よく日本に行って、文化も勉強すれば、日本語のしょうゆうけんも持っていると思っています。日本は「外国人は日本語をぜんぜん分からない」という考えを持っていなければ、たぶんもっと外国人は日本語を勉強してペラペラになれます。でも、今、日本に行って、日本人が外国人に英語だけで話すから、日本語がペラペラはととてもなりにくでしょう。

(And because of the issue of culture, perhaps those who are born or grew up in Japan have ownership. I believe that others also own it if they study it very hard, go to Japan and study the culture. If [people in] Japan do not have the idea that “foreigners cannot understand Japanese at all,” then foreigners can probably study the language more and become proficient. But if you go to Japan now, because Japanese people only speak English to foreigners, it is very difficult for them to become proficient.)

Though Amy links the ownership to NSs because of their familiarity with their own culture, she also believes that ownership is attainable with effort. At the same time, though, she attributes some of the difficulty to Japanese NSs' attitudes towards users of Japanese as L2.

Like Amy, three students (Sue, Carol, Lisa) expressed objections to, or disappointment about, the ideology that denies ownership of the Japanese language to foreigners, but they are hopeful that it has changed or is changing.

#### Essay Excerpt 6 (Sue)

日本語を勉強すると使う時、ときどき「所有権」が必要だと思います。歴史的な点から考えれば、日本人論のイデオロギーはまだ強く **pervasive** だと感じます。韓国語はとても違います。外国人は韓国語を習ったら、韓国人にとってもいいだと思います。いつも「頑張って」な感じますから。日本語はほんたいたいだと思います。でも、(university name)の友だちと日本語で話す時、「がんばって」な感だけ感じます。とても大きな違いはジェネレーションの違いし、学校で勉強しているし、日本は世界的な国になったからだと思います。

(If you study Japanese and you use it, sometimes I think that “ownership” is necessary. Considering the historical perspective, I feel that the ideology of *Nihonjinron* is still strong and pervasive. The Korean language is very different. If foreigners learn Korean, they think that it is good for Koreans. It's because there is always a feeling of “Ganbatte! (Hang in there!)” But [the situation with] the Japanese language is the opposite. But when I speak Japanese with [Japanese] friends at my university, I only sense their feeling “Ganbatte!” I think that the big difference is generational, and my friends also study at the university, and also because Japan is a global country now.)

Sue states that the ideology of *Nihonjinron* is still pervasive, but at the same time she observes that her Japanese friends studying in the U.S. are different. She attributes this to generational difference and change in Japan's status in the world.

Genni, an immigrant from Rwanda, realized that she, like other Rwandans, similarly held that her own language was not learnable for foreigners. Upon reading Levy's text, however, she changed her mind.

#### Essay Excerpt 7 (Genni)

でも、その作文を読むあとで「あー、よく勉強すれば、何でも言語をペラペラになれる」と考いた。したがって、ルアンダ語についてその考を持っていたが、日本語についての考えは違った。その時に、日本語の勉強は難しいのに、無じゃなかった。それから、リービ英雄の作文は私を教えてくれた。

(But after reading Levy's essay, I thought “Ah, if you study hard, you can be proficient in any languages. Therefore, even though I had similar thoughts about the Rwandan language, my idea about the Japanese language has changed. Though Japanese language learning was difficult, it was not impossible. And Levy's essay taught me (that).)



Most of the students (7 of 11) felt they could gain the ownership of Japanese despite considering it a formidable task including understanding of both language and culture. Their belief that Japanese is difficult seems to be based on the perceived difficulty of mastering the language, especially, its culture, honorifics, and *kanji*. Notably, it is mastery (of language) that many saw as key to the ownership of the language.

### **3.3 Retrospective Interviews**

Five students—Lisa, Sue, Erin, Genni, and Carol—were individually interviewed. Part of each interview was based on the student’s own essay, and part of it delved into the student’s views regarding ownership of language, transcultural writing, and Japanese language learning. We focus here on the students’ views regarding ownership of (Japanese) language.

Erin’s view is rather elusive at first. In her essay she states that a foreigner cannot have ownership of Japanese, and in the interview she initially links cultural heritage to ownership. However, she later asserts that if you felt that “you could speak English and really that you could use it to express yourself and convey ideas to anyone in that language,” then you could own English. She wishes to own Japanese in that way.

#### Interview Excerpt 1 (Erin)

But I don't know, if I went to Japan people would not view me as owning the language but, I feel, because I've been learning it for four years and I'm familiar with the culture and things that I have some ownership of it....

Levy's article probably did the most. It's just you know, making me think “well, if I actually go to Japan, what will people think of me if I speak well?” Or, you know. Or just like, persevering, you know, even if this is how I'm treated I still wanna learn the language and you know, work with it and make it mine.

Erin says Levy’s article contributed the most to her change of attitude. Having invested in the language and gained familiarity with Japanese language and culture, Erin is determined to have ownership, by which she seems to mean a high level of proficiency. She says she is prepared to persevere even if she meets with negative attitudes or rejection from NSs.

Genni and Sue also tie ownership of language to proficiency or mastery of language and culture. Genni stated that what Levy was doing in his essay was showing his mastery of language.

#### Interview Excerpt 2 (Genni)

He had to assert himself and be like, I own this language, I know everything—well, not everything, but like most of what I need to know—like, just as well as any Japanese native speaker.

Genni regards achievement of NS proficiency as qualifying a learner to own the language. Having moved to the United States at the age of six, she has a “native grasp of English” and feels that she owns the language. But she also thinks she would need to immerse herself in Japanese in Japan to get “a better grasp of the language”.

Sue also feels that she owns English but not Japanese. In response to an interview question, she described what is required for one to own a language.

#### Interview Excerpt 3 (Sue)

I guess it depends on how you look at it. But for me it's being fluent in the language in all aspects, so that includes writing, speaking, and reading. I'm not so successful in reading and writing Korean. I can do it, but it takes time and it's a struggle.

For Lisa, on the other hand, mastery of NS-like language is not what allows one to own that language. As soon as the interview started, and again when she was reminded of the essay by Levy she had read, she brought up Levy's own expression—*Nihongo-o motteiru*.

#### Interview Excerpt 4 (Lisa 1)

What I got out of that one, I guess, um, it's I, I like his example about like, um, when, when he would say “Nihongo-o motte iru” (have/possess Japanese), rather than like “Nihongo-o wakaru” (understand Japanese) or whatever. Um, because that, rather like, that's like *an example of like owning a language, coming up with their own phrases* I think, but then nobody was really like having it, but, and I understand that too, because I guess when, when people come and when people speak English when it's not their native language and say something, that's kind of funny. I guess people have a tendency to correct them when maybe they don't need to be corrected. (emphasis the author')

She reflects on her own attitude and awareness that L2 speakers who create their own expressions get corrected when they don't need to be.

Lisa thought further about the concept of ownership. After a few turns, when she was asked again about ownership, she drew an analogy between engineering (her major) and language use.

#### Interview Excerpt 5 (Lisa 2)

I think that's a kind of concept I have thought about. I mean, and that's, it's funny this actually relates to like engineering. He [a professor] said like you have to own a process. You have to own, like, and by owning it, it doesn't mean it's just following it like direction for direction or following somebody who already laid it out. Following, it means, like look at like, comp—*kind of taking it and making it your own by, you know, adapting it to what's important to you or something*. So I think that's the same with language, like, you, different people, like, maybe, um, somebody maybe interested in. (emphasis the author')

Carol, for her part, appears to have a sense of ownership of adapted Japanese, that is, she spontaneously uses a hybrid of English and Japanese. She concedes that the prevailing ideology makes it hard to own Japanese, stating “there's this sense of like, Japanese and Japan are very very closely linked in ways that other languages and their places of origin are not.” But when asked whether she would gain ownership of the language, she responded as follows.

#### Interview Excerpt 6 (Carol)

I'm curious about that because on one hand I feel like I would have to speak Japanese, and sort of use it in the context of being in Japan, which I haven't had much of a chance to do, so I'm not sure, maybe? ... But on the other hand, I've just, I just started thinking about this. Um, at Middlebury over the summer, there was this really interesting culture that develops about, among people who are learning Japanese and there's this sort of like, *gaikokujin-nihongo* [foreigner-Japanese] that happens and it's sort of like a mix of English and Japanese and like, mixed up in different ways and I *think there's an ownership of that*, kind of. (emphasis the author')

Carol's reflection upon her experience highlights her creation and ownership of a new repertoire via adoption of an English-Japanese mix during a nine-week intensive immersion summer program that obliged students to pledge to use the target language exclusively.

Despite perceiving a challenge, Erin feels she can cope with difficulties and make the language hers. Genni's and Sue's retrospective interviews reflect the idea that mastery of the language is required for one to gain (a sense of) ownership of the target language. Others, however, modify their ideas of ownership, or discuss diversified ways of attaining ownership. For Lisa, ownership of a language is gained by “taking it and making it your own by adapting it to what is important to you.” Carol, meanwhile, considers ownership to have been achieved in the shared hybrid language that she feels she owns, as one of the members of a community of Japanese-English users.

## 4 Discussions and Conclusion

### 4.1 *Plurilingual Practice and Students' Understanding of Ownership of Language*

We found that reading texts written by transcultural writers inspired and motivated many of the students to confront the ideology that ties ownership of the language to Japanese ethnicity. The plurilingual practice implemented in class appeared to have opened up opportunities for active contribution and participation, thereby minimizing the power relations in the classroom. This practice also allowed the students to deepen their thoughts and critically reflect on their own experiences, an essential aspect of critical literacy.

Not surprisingly, however, most students equated owning the target language with mastering the language/culture. Reading essays by transcultural writers who did “master” Japanese might have reinforced that idea among some of the students. The

belief that only mastery of the language allows one to claim ownership of it appears to be linked to the conventional idea of language as a defined set of lexical items and structures to be learned thoroughly, rather than a repertoire to which one adds new resources.

#### **4.2 Appropriating the L2**

One of the students, Lisa, understood ownership of language as going beyond mastery of it. For her, owning was possible through appropriation and adaptation of the language. Such a creative use of language is indeed regarded as genuine ownership. As Widdowson (1994, 384) puts it: “Real proficiency is when you are able to take possession of the language, turn it to your advantage and make it real for you.” Using Japanese in plurilingual practice is one way of appropriating the language. The practice Carol described—specifically, use of a Japanese variety mixed with English—involves the “deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire,” as does translanguaging, which Otheguy et al. (2015, 281) define as “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages.” Carol’s use of Japanese resources together with English resources liberated her from ideologies of NS supremacy. She developed her identity as a plurilingual speaker, stating that “my Japanese is probably always going to sound like the Japanese of a person who speaks English. And...I’m okay with that, because of this, sort of, this kind of culture foreigners learning Japanese [make], and there’s sort of a community in that.”

Carol appears to have a sense of owning the Japanese resources that have been added to her repertoire, and she can deploy them in a hybrid variety she refers to as “*gaikokujin-nihongo*,” as opposed to a bounded entity called the “Japanese language.” Reconceptualizing language as a set of linguistic resources rather than a bounded unit, then, enables L2 learners to gain ownership, diminishing the NS-NNS dichotomy in spite of the pervasive ideology.

The idea that language is a non-bounded, fluid entity is central to our approach and has direct bearing on access to a sense of ownership. This reconceptualization of language has gained support in the scholarship of both SLA (e.g., Cook’s multicompetence) and literacy (e.g., multiliteracies). This view of language also reconceptualizes “learning”: L2 speakers are no longer “learners” trying to emulate the practice of “native speakers,” but rather plurilingual speakers adding new resources to their repertoire and using them to actively and constantly engage in plurilingual practice. It is important for both teachers and students to recognize that such a practice is not performed at some particular learning stage—it is instead a normal, everyday practice that every individual with multiple linguistic resources engages in in one way or another (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015).

#### **4.3 Concluding Remarks**

Reading and discussing texts by transcultural writers, one of which dealt specifically with the ownership of the Japanese language, aided students in thinking deeply about the ideology that links the Japanese language exclusively to Japanese NSs, and about challenging this ideology. To some extent, this practice achieved a goal of language learning proposed by Doerr and Kumagai (2009, 314), that is, to “encourage learners

to maneuver through webs of power relations that are linked to [the] language one speaks, as well as to reject viewing language varieties in terms of dichotomies such as correct/incorrect...”

Students can also use linguistic and cultural resources to their advantage in meaning making as they interpret and write texts. NS teachers can learn a great deal from their plurilingual students. Giving students opportunities to read transcultural writers’ texts and think deeply about the ownership of language made it possible for some students, or at least Lisa, to look away from merely emulating the norm and toward conceptualizing ownership of language as “taking it and making it your own by adapting it to what’s important to you.” This willingness and ability to appropriate the target language—despite the ubiquitous NS-NNS power relations in the target language community—enabled students’ participation in the community as active members (Sato and Kumagai 2011).

Today, increasing mobility means that many people live in communities where the dominant language is not their native language. NNSs’ participation in society is therefore increasingly and unquestionably important. People also participate in online communities on a daily basis, constantly making decisions about language choices that suit their target audience and authorial purpose. Newly reconceptualized approaches to language, learning, and literacy, such as those discussed in this chapter, allow L2 education to prepare NNSs to become active social agents who can also function as cultural mediators in diverse contexts.

Over time, cognitive process-oriented SLA approaches have evolved, and the gap between the scholarship of New Literacy Studies and that of SLA has begun to narrow. In SLA today it is acknowledged more clearly than ever that the “one nation, one language” equation is false, and that languages are not separate (Larsen-Freeman 2018, 60–61). Larsen-Freeman (2018, 61) suggests that “a primary purpose of teaching foreign languages is for students to confront their own monolingual biases and to understand the many pragmatic and humanitarian benefits of language learning.” We hope that Japanese language education will help L2 Japanese students reflect on their biases, gain a sense of ownership, and confidently undertake to appropriate the language in order to exercise their agency and become full members of the communities they care about.

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