Toward More Inclusive Japanese Language Education: Incorporating an Awareness of Gender and Sexual Diversity among Students

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1. Background

Many educational institutions in North America have declared a commitment to enhancing the diversity of their students and employees, and to providing a learning and working environment free of discrimination. Almost universally, this diversity includes sexual orientation as well as gender identity and expression, and we teachers are naturally expected to play a role in fulfilling this commitment by working effectively with students and coworkers of diverse gender and sexual identities. Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki (this volume) present the voices of Japanese-language teachers concerned about the limited representation of gender and sexual diversity within this community of educators, as well as the reinforcement of heteronormativity and cissexism in teaching materials. Although I agree that the presence of visible LGBTQ teachers may have a positive impact on learners, as one respondent to the survey suggested, it is important to understand that many teachers are concerned that coming out in class/at work could potentially arouse negative reactions from students, colleagues, and/or administrators, putting their job at risk (Gray 2013; Jaspal 2015; Nelson 2009; Wadell, Frei, and Martin 2011). Furthermore, whether or not to come out is thoroughly up to each individual, not something that LGBTQ people should be pressured to do. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to promote the visibility of sexual/gender diversity within the Japanese teaching community per se, but rather to promote an inclusive learning environment in which all students feel comfortable studying Japanese—regardless of their gender and sexuality. Thus, while the theme of this

special section is "teacher diversity," this paper primarily addresses issues concerning learners of diverse genders and sexualities.

Although scholars such as Maree (2011) have previously drawn attention to this issue, research on gender and sexual minorities in Japanese language education has begun only recently (Arimori 2017; Moore 2019; Sall Vesselényi 2019a, 2019b). In the field of English language education, however, a number of informative studies have been published. For example, it has been pointed out that both teachers and students tend to believe that the entire class is heterosexual (Jaspal 2015, Nelson 2009), and many LGBTQ students hide their gender/sexual identities for fear of homophobia (Kappra and Vandrick 2006, Nelson 2009) or transphobia. Further, Norton (2013) argues even highly motivated learners may have little investment in language study if a given learning environment is homophobic. Also, it has been argued that the absence of LGBTQ representation in teaching materials can create an environment in which LGBTQ learners feel underrepresented and unsafe, preventing them from learning English effectively (Gray 2013, Snelbecker and Meyer 1999). Thus, hetero- and cisnormativity in a classroom can clearly have a negative impact on gender/sexual minority learners. Although these studies focus on English language education, these issues need to be addressed in Japanese language education as well in order to create an inclusive learning environment. To this end, I will address issues that may create challenges for LGBTQ learners, paying special attention to heteronormativity in Japanese teaching materials and linguistic norms and ideology regarding gendered expression in Japanese, and suggest ways teachers might deal with these issues.

2. Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Based on interviews with ESL students who identify as LGBTQ, Kappra and Vandrick (2006) argue that teachers have a strong ability to influence the establishment of a classroom atmosphere in which students feel accepted, safe, supported, and empowered, but many teachers fail to do so. As a member of a sexual minority group myself, I have encountered uncomfortable moments in and outside the classroom regarding diverse gender and sexual identities. Most of these moments originated in the teaching materials themselves and in the mishandling of problematic content by teachers, including myself. In order to improve the situation, I analysed five popular Japanese textbooks for beginners used in Canada— textbooks which are also widely used in the U. S.—by applying the notion

of queer pedagogy to identify potentially problematic contents for learners who are gender or sexual minorities (Arimori 2017).[1] Queer pedagogy is an approach to educational praxis and curricula which emerged from queer theory and critical pedagogy. It seeks to both uncover and disrupt hidden curricula of heteronormativity and cissexism, as well as to develop classroom landscapes and experiences that create safety for queer participants (Thomas-Reid 2018). In that paper, these five textbooks were examined regarding the absence within the textbooks of LGBTQ representation, the presence of exercises premised on heteronormativity, and the textbooks' explanation of gendered expression. This section summarizes and expands upon my findings, as well as providing suggestions to teachers about how—even when saddled with imperfect teaching materials—to create an inclusive learning environment for all students regardless of their gender and sexuality.

2.1. LGBTQ Representation in Japanese Language Teaching Materials

Japanese textbooks for the beginner's level typically have dialogues by regularly-appearing characters through which target expressions are introduced. While these characters appearing in the textbooks analysed in Arimori (2017) were diverse in terms of nationality and ethnicity, there was no diversity in terms of gender and sexual identity. To the best of my knowledge, no mainstream Japanese textbooks include LGBTQ characters or address LGBTQ-related issues. This sort of LGBTQ invisibility in teaching materials has also been an issue in English-language education. Previous studies report that the lack of LGBTQ representation in teaching materials often makes LGBTQ students feel silenced or un(der)represented, resulting in negative consequences for their learning (Gray 2013, Snelbecker and Meyer 1999). Thus, LGBTQ representation needs to be given consideration in both the development and the selection of Japanese teaching materials. In so doing, however, we need to be careful not to induce homo- and transphobic reactions rooted in the diverse backgrounds and beliefs of students as well as, potentially, teachers.

With this in mind, I would like to offer a lesson within *Marugoto Japanese Language & Culture Intermediate 2* (Japan Foundation 2017a) as an example of how teaching materials can offer teachers openings in which to judiciously introduce LGBTQ issues. In a dialogue about marriage, Yosuke, a male speaker, refers his partner as his *aikata*. *Aikata* is a gender-neutral term meaning a partner, originally used to describe someone with whom the speaker has a professional relationship. In recent

years, it has also been used for romantic relationships, and its use is quite common among same-sex couples. Although no explanation of the word's usage is provided in the textbook, it is noted in the teacher's manual that, since *aikata* can be used for same-sex partners, the gender of Yusuke's partner is "intentionally blurred" (Japan Foundation 2017b:4). Such inclusion of (potential) LGBTQ content allows teachers to control the degree of details they want to provide, from simply stating that the word is gender neutral to utilizing it as an opportunity for respectful discussion of issues related to gender and sexual identities, depending on the classroom climate.

By contrast, in *Genki II* (Banno et al. 2011) there is a pair work activity to practice the evidential modal *mitai* (look/seem like) in which the students look at an illustration of an androgynous person and one is prompted to state, *Watashi no tomodachi desu. Otoko desu.* (This is my friend. This is a man.) The other is prompted to respond, *Onna mitai desu ne.* (He looks like a woman.) In *Nakama 2* (Hatasa et al 2017), another evidential modal, *yōda* is introduced with the sentences *Onna no yōna otoko* (a man who acts/looks like a woman) and *Otoko no yōna onna* (a woman who acts/looks like a man). Because of norms regarding masculinity and femininity, phrases such as *onna mitai* and *otoko no yōna* are inherently negative. There is also the possibility that some students might laugh at the gender nonnormativity presented in the illustration or direct these expressions at others in the classroom in a mocking way. Thus, depending on how these materials are handled by teachers, such activities may make LGBTQ students feel unsafe. I have seen teachers using these materials despite their awareness of such problems, simply because these contents are in the textbooks. But, of course, we do not teach textbooks, we use them to teach. We can choose not to use such materials by skipping or replacing them. Alternatively, we may use them as an opportunity for a discussion of how such expressions can be discriminatory as an approach to creating a more inclusive classroom.

2.2. Heteronormative Textbook Exercises

Moore explains that "heteronormative assumptions…can have a profoundly debilitating effect on LGBT[Q] students in class" (2016:99) and presents cases wherein a heteronormative learning environment was a factor in LGBTQ learners quitting their English classes. The *Genki* and *Nakama* series have exercises in which students ask their partners about their daily lives and opinions. Such exercises enable learners to engage in

authentic or semi-authentic interaction, thereby helping them develop communicative skills. At the same time, however, those questions require potentially burdensome disclosure of some aspects of learners' private lives. As most textbooks assume everyone is heterosexual, it can be particularly trying for LGBTQ learners to engage in certain activities using those materials. For example, in *Genki II*, there is an exercise that leads students to ask their partners, *Kare/kanojo to ii tomodachi to dochira ga hoshii desu ka* (Which do you want, a boyfriend/girlfriend or a good friend?), using the cues provided. If their partner is a female, most students are likely to choose the pronoun *kare* (boyfriend) over *kanojo* (girlfriend) without thinking about the sexual orientation of their interlocutor. If the questioner's partner is a lesbian or asexual/aromantic, for example, the question may put her in a situation in which she is forced to either lie or to come out. Similarly, in *Nakama 2*, there is an exercise that leads students to ask their partners what they want to do before getting married. While same-sex marriage is now legal in Canada and the United States, that does not mean everyone supports it. Perhaps partly as a result of potential opposition LGBTQ learners may anticipate from their interlocutors, some may feel discomfort in talking about marriage at all. Some teachers might think it is just an exercise and learners can just make up a story. While there is no need for learners to tell the truth all the time, especially talking about their private lives, feeling forced to lie about one's identity can be distressful, particularly given that identity itself is constructed in part through language.

To circumvent such problems, teachers can modify questions at their discretion. In the case of the question in *Genki II*, teachers can introduce words and phrases such as *koibito* (boyfriend/girlfriend) and *sukina hito* (a/the person I like/love) as gender neutral expressions, for example. If there are multiple questions in an activity, teachers can instruct students to choose only half, for instance, or tell them they may skip up to a certain number of questions, thus enabling students themselves to avoid potentially problematic ones if they so choose.

2.3. Gendered Expression in Japanese Language Education
2.3.1. Gender norms and linguistic ideology
Japanese is considered a gendered language in the sense that there are distinctive speech styles used according to speakers' gender. Typically, these differences are said to be observed in the usage of personal pronouns, sentence endings, word choice, and so on. These differences are introduced in teaching materials, which generally explain in a gender

binarist fashion that certain language is used by either men or women (Arimori 2017, Kinoshita-Thomson and Iida 2007, Siegal and Okamoto 2003, Suzuki 2007). Analyses of naturally occurring conversation, however, have revealed that gendered expression is not necessarily used in a manner fixed to a speaker's gender, but, rather, is used to express and negotiate one's gender(ed) identity in a given context (Abe 2004, Miyazaki 2004, Sturtz Sreetharan 2004).[2] Nevertheless, deviation from normative usage for both men and women often becomes the target of criticism, reflecting pervasive sexism, gender binarism, and heteronormativity. This gender normative linguistic ideology can also be found in Japanese pedagogical materials. In their grammar reference book for Japanese-language teachers, Iori et al. remark that "it is especially unnatural for men to use the female-only form, so we need to call learners' attention to it" (2000:329). Similarly, *Tobira: Gateway to Advanced Japanese through Content and Multimedia*, aimed at intermediate Japanese learners, explains gendered speech as follows:

> Especially in informal speech, there are differences in the way men and women speak…. The intonation is also very different. When talking to friends, romantic partners, or family, men call themselves "*boku*" or "*ore*," and women usually use "*atashi*." In recent times, the gap between men and women has narrowed, and the number of women who use "*wa*" or "*wayo*" at the end of sentences and men who use "*ze*" or "*zo*" at the end of sentences as in the example above have decreased. However, if women say "*ore mo hara hetta*" [a masculine expression of "I'm hungry too"], or men say "*iyayo*" [a feminine expression of "No!"], their interlocutors will be surprised. Please be aware that there are some expressions that you shouldn't use, even though the difference in speech styles [between women and men] has decreased. (Oka et al. 2009:28–29)

Thus, both authors assert that nonnormative usage of gendered expression should be avoided. Some may argue that such statements are both reasonable and useful for learners since they might otherwise face situations wherein their usage of gender nonnormative speech would provoke negative reactions from others. I myself have felt this way sometimes. Nevertheless, let us consider the impact of this attitude on learners. Hosokawa believes this "paternalistic sense" is rooted in teachers' egocentric sense of being the expert—the one with "the right answer"— with the right to control the learning space and "to impose their own sense

of correctness, norms, and impressions" of how the language should be used (2016:23).

Further, since gendered expression is utilized to express one's gender identity, imposing a certain speech style on learners based on their gender is clearly problematic especially for those who identify as gender/sexual minorities. Sall Vesselényi maintains that if a teacher brings such a heteronormative attitude into the classroom, it becomes a training ground for self-concealment and preparation for participation in a cisgender-centred society (2019a:36–37). Given that language learning is not preparation for life but, rather, a part of life (Benson 2012) through which learners' identities are negotiated and established, I believe it is teachers' role to support this process rather than impose hetero- and cisnormativity on them.

2.3.2. Teaching gendered expression

The discussion in the previous section leads us to how gendered expression might best be taught. As noted above, gendered expression is not exclusively used by one gender or the other but utilized to express and negotiate each individual's gender identity. Suzuki (2007) maintains that, in order for learners to become able to express their gender identity through language, it is necessary for them to understand the linguistic ideology shared in society. When doing so, as Kinoshita-Thomson and Iida (2007) suggest, rather than a grammatical/discourse rule, gendered expression can be presented as an "abstract norm" which can be utilized as a tool to send a variety of messages by adhering to or opposing it. Further, when discussing gendered expression and identity, the concept of *gengo-shigen* (Nakamura 2007), or language resource, is useful. This language resource is an aggregate of various speech styles from which an individual chooses a certain way to speak depending on the identity they want to express in a given situation. For example, in everyday practice the same individual speaks differently as a parent, a friend, a customer, a professional, and so forth. Nakamura extends this concept of language resource to gendered expression and regards male language and female language as elements of *gengo-shigen* to which everybody, regardless of gender, has equal access. While the essentialist view of language assumes men and women speak differently because of their sex/gender, this social constructivist concept enables us to detach language from gender and to utilize the resource to express our diverse identities. By introducing the concept of *gengo-shigen* into the classroom, we can provide space for

learners to explore, negotiate, and establish their gender and sexual identities in Japanese.

Introducing the concept of *gengo-shigen* can take various forms according to students' proficiency level. Similar to Siegal and Okamoto's (2003) suggestions for teaching gendered expression at lower levels, for example, we can first draw learners' attention to diverse speech styles by reflecting on their own language use, and have them observe how the same person speaks differently in relation to their interlocutor or situation through, for instance, TV dramas, and discuss what kind of impression they get from different speech styles. By changing the focus to difference by factors such as age, gender, and regional background, we can help learners strengthen their own ability to access to this language resource. As their proficiency increases, we can have students put this ability into use through creating skits, dramas, short videos, and the like, performing as a character with any identity learners wish to explore.

3. Conclusion

This article discussed various challenges for LGBTQ learners of Japanese stemming from pervasive heteronormativity and cissexism—including specific norms and ideology regarding gendered expression—and made suggestions to mitigate the lack of training regarding gender/sexual diversity in Japanese language education. As I explained, teaching materials often presuppose everyone in the classroom is heterosexual and cisgender, and some exercises in textbooks create situations in which LGBTQ students are forced to either lie about their identity or come out. Further, some textbook exercises can even arouse homophobia or transphobia. Although not all teachers have the freedom to choose teaching materials, how they use these materials is often up to the teachers' discretion. There are many things teachers can do to create an inclusive learning environment, some of which were suggested. Another issue discussed was how to teach Japanese as a gendered language without reinforcing gender norms. Given that language use is a key part of expressing one's gender, it is vital to create space in which learners can explore their identities as Japanese speakers. To that end, I proposed introducing the concept of *gengo-shigen*, which detaches language from one's gender and enables learners to use various speech styles as a resource to express their identity. It is my hope that this article will help teachers make their Japanese language classrooms safe spaces in which all

students are able to learn and express themselves freely regardless of their gender and sexuality.

NOTES

[1] The table below shows the textbooks examined in Arimori (2017).

Textbook	Publisher	Year of publication
Genki I & II, 2nd edition	The Japan Times	2011
Japanese for Busy People I–III, 3rd edition	Kodansha USA	2006, 2007
Minna no Nihongo Beginner I & II, 2nd edition	3A Corporation	2011, 2013
Nakama 1st, 2nd, and 3rd edition	Heinle & Heinle	2014, 2017
Situational Functional Japanese 1–3, 2nd edition	Bonjinsha	1991–1996

[2] For example, Miyazaki (2004) revealed that both female and male junior high students use various first-person pronouns, including those of the opposite gender in order to express and establish their identities, create a sense of solidarity, and empower relationships among peers within their classroom community. Further Abe (2004) examined language use at lesbian bars in Tokyo and concluded various personal pronouns and gendered speech styles were used by speakers to constantly negotiate their identities in relation to others. Furthermore, Sturtz Sreetharan (2004) analyzed the usage of sentence final particles by men and found that masculine endings are used infrequently in actual conversation.

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