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Toward Exhilarating Classrooms: Representation vs. Inclusion in Japanese Language Education

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1. Introduction

Faculty diversity is currently a major avenue through which many teacher-scholars are exploring the work of diversity and inclusion within Japanese language education. Many in the field have begun to look critically at the large number of Japanese (L1 Speaker) teachers within the field and consider its relationship to the native speaker fallacy (Kubota 2008), or the prevalence of biases against non-native speakers. The survey, “On Goals of Language Education and Teacher Diversity,” by Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki (this volume) reports that of 355 Japanese-language teacher participants, 79% identified as female and 73% understood themselves as first-language speakers of Japanese (273). This leads to concern that the dominance of this intersectional identity group may lead to discrimination within the workplace, but, even more importantly, that it fosters a lack of diversity and inclusion in the classroom and in the curriculum.

The need to create environments where a diverse population of students can communicate beyond differences and learn from each other is urgent. This self-interrogation of group dominance, which moreover has been driven and supported in large part by the dominant group, is highly laudable, and there are certainly valid concerns to be addressed. Nevertheless, pursuing inclusivity by altering representation in this case has the potential to perpetuate larger structures of oppression and allow us to shirk the responsibility of doing the truly difficult work that inclusivity requires of each of us. Focusing too narrowly on representation, moreover, misses the opportunity that the work of inclusivity presents us with of re-envisioning the potential of our classrooms and integrating our values with the way that we teach. In what follows, I would like to first consider what



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a truly inclusive language classroom could look like, and then discuss its implications for the debate on teacher diversity.

2. Inclusivity vs. Representation

In the work of inclusivity that I have undertaken on my own campus thus far, I have come to differentiate between two types of diversity initiatives: representation vs. inclusivity. The work of representation is in essence a drive to hire more faculty and staff of color so that the significant population of students of color on campus are able to “see themselves” in the people that teach and guide them. It looks to address the problem of diversity by bringing a wider array of identities onto campus, and usually the focus is on race and gender. The work of inclusion is fundamentally different. To begin with, it can be done by anybody. It is rooted by contrast in self-reflection on the part of the individual faculty/staff members with regard to the privileges they carry – primarily around gender, race, social class, and nationality, though there are other facets to consider – and how those privileges perpetuate cultures of exclusion.

The nature of privilege is that those who carry it do not necessarily know that they do. Exclusion occurs when privilege is unacknowledged for, in the absence of acknowledgement, that privilege and its assumptions become understood as natural, i.e., the hidden norm. Take, for example, a first year Japanese-language student from a working-class family who is unable to afford the trip home over a fall break. On the first day after break, the teacher, seeking to refresh students on recent vocabulary, asks the class where they traveled over the break and whether they took a train or an airplane to get there. (I have been guilty of asking these very questions myself.) A student happily talks about a family vacation in Singapore, while another references their flight back from Colorado. This seemingly innocent dialogue contains implicit assumptions about a level of economic means that is not available to everyone. And those students who do not tend to feel tacitly excluded, as if they do not really belong there, or are somehow in the wrong place. This is to say that a multitude of assumptions about race, gender, and class *already* exist in our teaching and within our classrooms. If we do not address them, they threaten to become the invisible norm that implicitly and subtly excludes those who do not share those contexts. If we are able to address them, however, we disrupt the power these hierarchies hold within our social spaces and create room for differences to exist and co-exist.

Inclusivity targets the nature of the space of learning and the assumptions that exist there. The teacher, who is the individual with the most power in the room, has the ability to name those assumptions and prevent them from becoming the invisible norm. If I were teaching a first year Japanese class, for example, inclusive teaching would involve me talking openly about my race/ethnicity (mixed Japanese and light-skinned African American), nationality (US, but born in Japan), gender (cis, male), sexuality (heterosexual), class upbringing (upper-middle-class), as well as my elite education and how all of these social identities impact my relationship to Japanese, the reasons I teach it, and the way that I teach it. This transparency would be sustained throughout the semester through an openness in discussing these aspects of social identity as they come up within the class content.

This openness could occur in a number of ways. I might share with students that my deep familiarity with Japan comes not from my mother per se but from yearly summer trips to Japan throughout my childhood, trips that were made possibly by my father's economic status. For that reason, I teach Japanese culture as if it is something I know despite the fact that I was raised in the US. With regard to actual lessons, I might point out the way certain dialogue scenarios in the textbook assume that everyone goes to a four-year college, which is a norm for me, but not for everyone. This openness could involve me explaining ways my social identities have shaped my own relationship to the Japanese language. For instance, in introducing the issue of gendered speech, I might share the way, growing up without male Japanese speakers in my vicinity, I had to be shamed into adopting male speech by outsiders just around the time I became a teenager. Or I could talk about the way I was absolutely determined, during college, to learn Japanese because of an acute desire to claim my Japanese identity, or "become" Japanese. (Depending on the context, I might also relate how I would discover, years later, that this was a fool's errand, given the very strict definition of national identity in Japanese culture.) Such a story could open up a very interesting conversation about language ideology and how our racial background can inform the way we approach the language. It must be understood that the power that privilege has to exclude is mostly dependent upon its invisibility, or its ability to establish an invisible norm against which students feel either implicitly validated or disavowed. The willingness to be transparent about privilege disrupts this power. By making privilege visible, we reverse the process of exclusion, enabling those students who

lack that privilege to recognize themselves and be recognized by others within the classroom space. Being willing to share personal experiences, moreover, opens up the possibility of deeper conversations that can more fully integrate the individuality of the student into the language learning process.

Inclusivity does not require that we learn to anticipate the needs of the myriad intersectional identities and experiences in the classroom. Certainly, more education on difference is desirable, and preparation for how to teach topics of race when they come up more explicitly in the upper level language classrooms is also important. But inclusivity asks us to examine ourselves and the spaces we immediately inhabit, to recognize the way dynamics of difference and power saturate our teaching materials (of all levels) and the space of our classroom. It demands that we examine the relationships within that classroom amongst students but also perhaps most importantly between teacher and student(s). Because of our positions of power, teachers are uniquely positioned to expose the structures of privilege within a classroom. By being able to talk openly about ourselves and our positions within social hierarchies, an act of vulnerability in itself, we have an ability to make those invisible hierarchies explicit within the classroom space. This is not an egotistical gesture. Being explicit about one's own context allows students, from all backgrounds, to have and feel comfortable having their own contexts within that space as well. If implicit rules and hidden contexts are what breed exclusion, inclusivity seeks to publicly identify those rules and contexts as they occur within the spaces we currently inhabit, thereby neutralizing their exclusionary power.

Unlike representation-based initiatives, which largely focus on race and gender, inclusion-based initiatives address a much broader array of social identities and engages them directly through the lens of power and discrimination. But unlike representation, the work of inclusivity also requires more personal courage. It necessitates the willingness and ability to be strategically vulnerable in the classroom. While both representation and inclusivity are essential and can be pursued in tandem, representation does not necessarily lead to cultural change. Not all people of color, for instance, are interested in or are intentional about diversity work themselves. Inclusivity on the other hand addresses the ills of racism/classism/sexism/etc. head on and carries the potential for ground-up transformation.

3. Ramifications for the Debate on Teacher Diversity

So, what does this mean for the issue of the predominance of L1 female-identifying speakers in the Japanese teaching community? First, one should be aware that the work of inclusivity is first and foremost about fighting the oppressive power dynamics of society at large. This lens permits us to counterbalance the needs of representation within the smaller society of Japanese-language teachers with the need to counter forces of oppression within our broader society. I empathize with the experiences of discrimination described by many of my white colleagues as I myself have been in institutional spaces pervaded by the assumption that white or non-Japanese teachers are at a decided handicap when dealing with issues of Japanese language pedagogy. I have encountered the vexing prejudice that we, as non-native speakers, are somehow always and already at a one tier remove from the authentic ability to teach the material. Yet, without gainsaying the validity of the needs that spring from these situations, there is nonetheless a rich irony in the call for an affirmative action-type correction of representational balance for white, and especially white male, faculty.

Perhaps the goal common to all of us is an institutional environment in which each teacher is understood to have the same potential for powerful and rich language teaching, whatever their social identity might be, Japanese or non-Japanese, male, female, transgender and/or gender non-conforming, upper-class, middle-class, or working class, etc. But attempting to achieve this goal by somehow tipping the scales to introduce more non-L1 speakers of Japanese into our teaching ranks not only fails to address the problem directly (who is to say that the newly hired white male Japanese teacher does not himself faithfully subscribe to native speaker supremacy), but it also ignores the larger structures of oppression in which these conditions are created.

Unfortunately, one of the reasons there are so many women in this field to begin with is because of its low pay, its instability, and its “low-status perception.” As quite a few respondents of the survey pointed out, the gender imbalance in the field results in part from “non-competitive salaries that are unattractive to men, who are often considered to be the primary earner of the household” (Mori et al. this volume: 287). For Japanese women living in the U. S., Japanese-language teacher may be one of the very few jobs that are open to, welcoming of, and demanding of them. The link between (Japanese) women and (Japanese) language teaching is also a product of patriarchal ideology. Under patriarchal

thought, women are understood as caregivers, educators and nurturers of the young generation. One perception of language teaching is that it is a part and parcel of this child-rearing labor. No doubt this perception is one of the sources of that discriminatory bifurcation between language course teachers and content course teachers mentioned in the survey as a worsening divide in colleges and universities (Mori et al., this volume, 287–288). No doubt this is also why the job is so often low-paying and unstable. In Tokyo today, Japanese-language teachers can hardly earn a living wage teaching Japanese, no matter what their qualifications.

But because Japanese teachers of Japanese language are understood to teach non-Japanese students, that patriarchal thought is further augmented by national and racial hierarchies. Japanese women are expected to become embodied ambassadors of the ideals of Japanese culture, most immediately manifested in their vocal expression. They perform the Japanese language in order to cultivate the foreign student into a proper, socially acceptable, Japanese speaker/subject. There are some female Japanese teachers who assimilate this nurturing/rearing role so completely that they are never able to break out of a mothering tone and diction, even after the beginning levels when simple diction is to some extent appropriate, ultimately infantilizing their non-Japanese students.¹ When female Japanese teachers tell or suggest to their foreign students that they can never master Japanese (anecdote reported in Mori et al. this volume), it is possible that they are channeling the cultural ideology that non-Japanese people can never become Japanese. But it is also possible that the teachers feel the need to keep their students in a position of childlike dependence. Alternately, it could be understood as a reaction of displaced resentment toward the servile position in which they are placed. To be clear, these tendencies do not describe all female Japanese teachers; individual stories are always, of course, varied, unique, and often resistant. But I describe here the pressures within the teaching culture generated by the dictates of patriarchy, national chauvinism, and racial/gender hierarchy that female Japanese teachers in particular confront.

Instead of calling for more “diversity” in the ranks of Japanese teachers, implicitly suggesting to female Japanese teachers that their presence needs to be curbed, it seems far more productive to promote a teaching culture in which the dictates of patriarchy, national chauvinism, and racial/gender hierarchy are called out and openly defied. Being able to name these hierarchies would be a way to create an inclusive classroom *and* stage a deeper and more authentic engagement with the Japanese

language. What if a given female Japanese teacher were to begin a language course by pointing out the ways she fits into expectations that the students may have for what their teacher should look like? What if she then called attention to the way authority regarding the language is given to her by the students much more readily than it would be to a non-Japanese colleague as way to start a discussion or at least instigate a consciousness about the deeply rooted link in Japanese culture between language and national/racial/gender identity. To do so could be very empowering for the many students who have implicitly received the message that as non-Japanese they can never really master the language. Through this self-initiated vulnerability, the teacher would enable the students to name the source of that lie. If she were able to call attention to the racial and gendered paradigm that implicitly undergirds Japanese language education, she would empower students to be able to identify and separate themselves from the way this dynamic is reflected back to them within the textbooks that they learn from. It would permit the Hispanic girl who has some Japanese heritage, or the transgender Hmong student to feel recognized all of a sudden, simply by dint of exposing the lie of racial, sexual, and gendered expectations.

In carrying out their roles as ambassadors of Japanese culture, Japanese teachers often end up suppressing aspects of their identity (socio-economic class, region, ethnicity) as well as experiences that run against the grain of the official image of Japanese culture: uniformly and homogeneously middle class, cisgendered and heterosexual, highly educated, technologically literate, polite and deferent, tolerant and apologetic, historically knowledgeable, aesthetically sophisticated, slim and/or petite with mild to non-existent hand gestures. Native Japanese teachers are not simply supposed to present this version of Japan, they are expected to embody it. What if native Japanese teachers made a concerted effort to identify, emphasize, and explain the various ways in which they ran aground of these stereotypes, stood out, and/or struggled both externally and internally because they diverged from this very elaborate and extremely stringent standard of being Japanese? What if Japanese teachers were willing to talk about their relationship to the Japanese language itself, and how *that* relationship was mediated by gender, socio-economic class, and all of the different facets of identity we possess? There are many female L1 speaking teachers who are already doing this type of courageous work. These teachers need to be supported and looked to as pioneers of inclusive teaching, not replaced in order to fulfill an abstract

standard of balance.

This change in method and mentality would be the surest path to the creation of the type of equitable institutional spaces described above, where L2 speaking teachers are recognized for their potential in the same way that L1 speaking teachers are. If the goal is to teach Japanese language in a context that constantly identifies how the ideologies of nationality, race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. mediate the speaking, teaching, and learning experience, then teachers of all social identities will be on the same plane. But this would also have a direct and definitive impact on our classrooms and our students. The discussions and consciousness this type of teaching could foment has potentially very powerful implications for language learning and cultural literacy. Such lessons would be forceful, memorable, and exhilarating not just because they would offer critical insights into the culture, insights that create ways for students of various backgrounds and contexts to imagine they actually have a place within Japan and Japanese culture. But these stories and lessons would also be rooted in the real-life experience of the human being standing in front of the classroom. Inclusive teaching does not just humanize the students, but also humanizes the teachers, allowing them to be more themselves and experience the deep pleasure of alignment between who they are and what they are teaching. These are the great benefits we stand to gain from doing the difficult work of creating diverse and inclusive spaces in our classrooms.

NOTES

¹ Noriaki Furuya has discussed the use of “*ano ko* (that kid/child)” amongst Japanese teachers to refer to their foreign students as indicative of a “paternalism” latent in Japanese language education and how Japanese-language teachers can often form a sense of identity based on this stance (2012). The article has stirred a lively debate within the field. Yōhei Arakawa has a chapter devoted to what he refers to as “The Mode of Treating [Students] Like Children” in his book on Japanese people talking to foreigners, especially foreign students (2012).

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