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Diversity, Inclusion, and Professionalism in Japanese Language Education: Introduction to the Special Section

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1. Introduction

Diversity and inclusion have become a major concern in academic and professional institutions in recent years. As educators, we are responsible for creating environments where a diverse population of students can communicate beyond differences and learn from each other. The sense of urgency to address this concern has been intensified by a series of recent events that brought the issue of systemic social and racial injustice to the fore. As we finalize this special section in the early summer of 2020, daily news is filled with reports on the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 upon racial and ethnic minorities, the rise of anti-Asian xenophobia symbolized by the repulsive use of the expressions such as “Chinese virus” or “kung flu,” as well as the global reach of antiracism demonstrations, fueled by the police killing of George Floyd. As a community of educators, advocacy for justice should be the core of our values. Language education should play a pivotal role in underscoring the importance of embracing differences and take responsibility for developing a younger generation’s perspectives and dispositions to fight against injustice. Diversity and inclusion, as we envision here, is integral to such a mission of language education and as such cannot be emphasized enough in the current moment.

While this educational mission is widely recognized, in our opinion, we have not sufficiently examined the extent to which a culture of diversity and inclusion has been fostered and actually practiced within our professional community. For instance, according to the Japan Foundation survey conducted in 2015, 77.3% of Japanese-language instructors in North America were “native speakers” of Japanese (Japan Foundation 2017a).¹ This is the largest percentage of all the world regions. What kinds of factors might have contributed to this disproportional representation of



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“native speakers”? And what kinds of consequences might result from such a demographic composition? Are we creating an inclusive professional community where educators from diverse backgrounds can support each other and grow together? Are we demonstrating the kinds of dispositions and practices that we aim to instill in our students in our own everyday conduct? The exploration of these questions is needed as we consider ways to enhance diversity and inclusion in our classrooms.

As an initial step forward, we—along with Kimiko Suzuki (Haverford College) and Jisuk Park (Columbia University until December 2019)—organized a roundtable discussion at the 2019 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) with the sponsorship of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ). Prior to this roundtable, we had conducted an online survey in the fall of 2018 to better grasp Japanese-language teachers’ perspectives on diversity, inclusion, and professionalism, and asked a panel of four Japanese-language educators with diverse academic and ethnic backgrounds to comment on the survey results and to share their views on the current state of Japanese language education in North America.² The roundtable generated numerous proposals and suggestions for future courses of action, including the development of this special section, which aims to further our discussion on this topic. Overarching questions posed throughout this special section are as follows:

- What are the goals of language education in today’s globalized world? And what kinds of qualifications are required for language educators in order to attain these goals?
- What kinds of unconscious biases may be observed in our profession, and what are the challenges and obstacles that may arise in overcoming such biases?
- How can we foster diversity and inclusion among peers and prospective peers?
- How can we, as a group of Japanese-language users and educators, present a model of global citizenship to our students?

This introductory article provides a brief overview of the backgrounds and motivations for this special section and outlines its organization.

2. Why This Now?

Owing to increased mobility and technological advancements, our world is more connected than ever. This current trend, however, has also generated an adverse reaction from those in fear of losing traditional

structures and of diminishing borders. As a result, we are witnessing instances of xenophobia towards minorities and immigrants, as well as divisive policies that may inflame chauvinism. In such a polarized climate, diversity is often at the center of public discourse, along with other related topics such as equality, equity, access, and inclusion. Many educational associations have responded to this momentum and articulated their stances on this issue. For example, as the leading organization of world language education in America, ACTFL released a position statement in May 2019, in which diversity and inclusion are emphasized as the core of the organizational mission:

ACTFL believes strongly in equal access to world language study and equitable opportunities for all individuals to develop linguistic and cultural competence and pedagogical knowledge. No individual should experience marginalization of their contributions or talents because of their unique attributes. Among others, these attributes include age, belief system, disability status, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression, language identity, national origin, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and any other visible or non-visible attributes. At the heart of this commitment is the recognition that the richness of diversity within ACTFL's membership and the language education community at-large is beneficial to both the individual and the global community. (ACTFL 2019)

Diversity is discussed here not only in terms of racial and gender matters but is extended to encompass any attributes that people possess. This statement also highlights that diversity in all its forms contributes to rich and dynamic experiences of people involved in teaching and learning. While diversity is often upheld as a corrective measure to counter imbalance and discrimination (cf., Modern Language Association 2005), its educational merits and impacts are also recognized and celebrated.

The organizational commitment to diversity and inclusion is also matched by recent discussions among applied linguists who espouse the transformative and cross-bordering nature of language and language use (e. g., Canagarajah 2013, Hawkins and Mori 2018, Li 2018, Pennycook and Otsuji 2018). Translingualism, metrolingualism, and other similar concepts have been explored enthusiastically in recent journal publications and academic conferences. As Kramersch (2019) recently wrote, these trans-/multi- perspectives evoke a renewed goal of language education:

Our ecological times call for a greater attention given not to citizens or consumers, but to denizens of a language ecology that demands sensitization to the workings of language as symbolic power and an ability to respond to its abuses. (13)

Kramersch's concern about the future directions of language education acutely reflects recent political and cultural divides among the American public, which is ironically boosted by the very nature of globalization. The metaphor of "denizen" is proposed here to denote plasticity and multiplicity of membership subsumed in the globalized world. With the world becoming smaller and smaller, boundaries will cease and blending and symbiosis will accelerate. Clearly, the rise of attention to diversity and inclusion in public and academic discourse is a direct consequence of the sociocultural and political climate surrounding us.

Meanwhile, as a super-aged society, Japan is currently facing imminent social changes. In an effort to circumvent the ever-growing workforce shortages, the Japanese government decided to increase the volume of incoming foreign workers in Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). The increase of foreign-born immigrants in Japan may gradually transform the monoethnic and monolingual ideology, which appears to be still prevalent in Japanese society (Moody 2014, Tsurutani 2012). It is also expected that this policy will have direct impacts on Japanese language education. Most prominently, in June 2019, the Diet passed the Japanese Language Education Promotion Bill, which aims to secure opportunities for foreign immigrants to receive adequate training in Japanese language. Various aspects of Japanese language education, including teacher certification, proficiency assessments, and instructional guidelines, will likely be reexamined and reformed under this new law (Agency for Cultural Affairs 2019).

These recent developments in Japan inevitably alter the broader context in which Japanese language education is delivered in North America as well. In fact, it is well documented that our students' populations and their interests have changed over time, reflecting sociocultural, economic, and political dynamics of the relationship between Japan and North America and other nations (e. g., Japan Foundation 2017b, Miura 1990, Noda 2014). After World War II, Japanese Studies programs began to be established at major universities and the language was taught in the context of the area studies tradition. While the population of Japanese-language learners grew steadily in the

1950s–1970s, the first boom in Japanese language study occurred in the 1980s through the early 1990s, the era of the Japanese bubble economy. During that time, students motivated to learn Japanese for its perceived instrumental value for their career paths in business, technology, and beyond started to populate the classroom, and Japanese language began to be more commonly offered in K–12 settings as well. While a decline in enrollment was observed in the late 1990s upon the burst of the bubble economy, with the rise of global circulation and consumption of Japanese popular culture, the 2000s and on have seen a surge of students with new sets of interest and affinity with Japan. The rapid increase of international students from Asia (China, in particular) to North America observed in the 2010s has also changed the context of Japanese language education, especially in higher education. The ongoing transformation of Japan today will surely impact how we envision the world for which we are training our students, as well as ourselves.

The historical development briefly summarized above also appears to have some implications for the current and future make-up of our professional community. Miura (1990), for instance, discusses how the Japanese language study boom in the 1980s triggered a shortage of qualified instructors. Likewise, Samuel (1987) introduces the following quote of one of the respondents to a survey on Japanese language education in North America she conducted with her colleague in the mid 1980s: “If we had any near-native non-Japanese with training and/or experience, we would hire them as first priority. But there are no such instructors here” (135). To meet the demand of the rapid enrollment growth during the period, it appears that a number of Japanese, who were also interested in studying and working abroad in North America, were brought into the newly created positions, especially those in higher education. Three decades later, we again face a teacher shortage. According to the survey conducted by the Japan Foundation in 2015, for example, the number of Japanese-language teachers in North America—U. S. A. and Canada combined—has decreased by 8.2% from that in 2012, despite the steady enrollments in our classrooms (Japan Foundation 2017a). How can we overcome the challenge this time, given the current sociocultural, economic and political dynamics?

It is indeed eye-opening to read Samuel (1987), who reports the outcomes of a panel entitled “Issues confronting non-native teachers of Japanese and their colleagues” held at the 1985 Association of Teachers of Japanese conference.³ Many of the issues raised in the article, including

“instances of prejudice and discrimination against non-native instructors,” “hiring policies and practices,” “status of TJFL as an academic discipline,” and “distribution of teaching responsibilities,” continue to persist today, according to the results of our 2018 survey. The percentage of “native speakers” in the profession today (77.3% according to the 2015 Japan Foundation survey) is in fact higher than what Samuel reports as the results of their mid-1980 survey, i. e., 64.4%, although we must acknowledge the difference in how these numbers were generated by the two surveys. Of course, the perceived lack of diversity among teachers is also recognizable in other personal attributes such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and so forth, and the intersectionality of these attributes also complexifies our understanding of the power dynamics. Needless to say, the situation is multidimensional and cannot be attributed to a single cause.

Given all these issues, why this now? This special section resulted from a collaborative endeavor among those concerned about the future of our profession. We believe that keeping a thriving and healthy professional community is not a matter of luxury. It is a necessity for the profession to survive and continue providing service to our society. Despite the surge of public interests in diversity and inclusion, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no concerted efforts in our professional community, up until now, to reflect on our practice and beliefs concerning this very issue. Probing our community and our professionalism is not a straightforward task, for it may potentially expose our negligence and oversight. Nonetheless, it is important to be reminded that critical self-reflection is the very first step toward systematic changes that are needed to move forward (Bhattacharya, Jiang, and Canagarajah 2019; Kubota and Miller 2017). Such changes may take various forms, including re-specification of instructional goals and curricular targets, education of future teachers, professional development of in-service teachers, revisions to teaching materials, structural/institutional reforms, scholarly research, and clarification of the vision, mission and governance of a professional association such as AATJ. In the end, the issues at hand are consequential not only to the quality of teaching and learning but also to the lives of our teachers and our students.

3. The Organization

This special section consists of an article that summarizes the results of the online survey and twelve commentaries authored by individuals who

have engaged in Japanese language education in North America in different capacities and contexts.

The anchor article reports the quantitative and qualitative results of the online survey to which more than 350 Japanese-language educators from North America submitted their responses (approximately 79% of them are female; 73 % first language speakers of Japanese; 63% M. A. holders; 50% with teaching experience of more than sixteen years; 60% working in higher education). The results illuminate converging and diverging perspectives on instructional goals, contradictions or dilemmas between aspirational ideals and mundane practices, as well as fundamental societal and institutional conditions that impact the professional lives of language educators. The majority of the survey participants shared their understanding that the field is lacking in diversity, especially in regard to ethnic/cultural backgrounds, gender/sexuality, and age/generation. The report also introduces several open-ended comments submitted by the survey participants in order to illustrate how the lack of diversity manifests itself in day-to-day professional experiences. The episodes shared by these participants invite the readers to consider how our unconscious biases, or reluctance to take an action on an issue that one is aware of, may lead to the perpetuation of reduced inclusivity and diversity in the Japanese language educator community.

To initiate open dialogs, we asked the twelve commentary authors, who represent diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, areas of expertise, institutional affiliations, and stages of their careers, to review the survey results, critically reflect on the current state of Japanese language education in North America, and discuss future actionable items from their various viewpoints. The contributors consist of the original members of the AAS roundtable, the audience of the AATJ keynote session or the AAS roundtable session who shared their responses to our presentations, and others who were recommended to us because of their research on a related topic, or the leadership roles they have assumed in the field. We are grateful for these contributors who accepted our invitations. The twelve commentaries indeed complement each other and offer many opportunities for us to reflect on our own thinking and actions.

The commentaries are clustered together based on the common themes identified among them. The first four address the central issue of our profession—how we should conceptualize the object of instruction and what kinds of qualifications are necessary to deliver the instruction. The survey results indeed reveal that while the participants share the

understanding that we must facilitate students' development of flexibility and sensitivity towards diverse cultures, they vary in their emphasis on standard Japanese and native-like accuracy as targets of language instruction. In response to the native-speakerism expressed by some of the survey participants, Mahua Bhattacharya reviews how language ideologies established through Japan's modernization process continues to impact our teaching materials and practices today. To change the course, she explores possibilities for altering our approaches in the classroom to deemphasize idealized native-speaker models and to showcase successful second language (L2) speakers of Japanese instead. Drawing on the findings of her own research, Jae Takeuchi also discusses how the ideology that associates Japanese language competence with Japanese ethnicity or nationality is still pervasive in everyday interaction and how it affects even highly proficient L2 speakers of Japanese and makes them feel unconfident about using Japanese in its full complexities. Based on these findings, she advocates for the importance of language pedagogy that facilitates the development of our students as legitimate and "fearless" speakers of Japanese. Shinsuke Tsuchiya, on the other hand, sheds light on the challenge of establishing a balance between celebrating diversity and identifying a so-called target language. Tokyo-based standard Japanese has been introduced as the model to aspire to because of its symbolic power and linguistic capital, but in practice the strict enforcement of "correctness" can induce anxiety for students and in effect endorse the standard language ideology. He shares his conundrums and approaches to this issue as a teacher and teacher-trainer who faces an increasingly diverse group of graduate teaching assistants. Similarly, Etsuyo Yuasa shares her experiences and perspectives as a faculty member who is responsible for training future Japanese-language instructors. Beyond the ability to use Japanese language, language-teaching professionals must be equipped with the understanding of how the system of Japanese language works and the ability to incorporate such knowledge while weighing in the consequences of favoring particular variants over others.

The next four commentaries remind us that although the native versus non-native dichotomy tends to attract attention in the field of language education, that is not the only critical factor when discussing the issue of diversity and inclusion in our professional community. In fact, the language-based categories also often intersect with various other social categories in forming oppression and discrimination in different contexts.

Ryuko Kubota, for instance, directs our attention to issues of race that are manifested in some of the open-ended comments submitted by the survey participants. They include cases of self-identified white teachers of Japanese facing students' disbelief that they can speak and teach Japanese, as well as native Japanese-speaking K–12 teachers of Japanese marginalized in their school districts due to their limited English proficiency and non-citizen status. Describing different layers and forms of racism observed in such incidents, Kubota encourages Japanese-language educators to engage in antiracism as a step towards the advancement of diversity and inclusion in the field. Jotaro Arimori, on the other hand, discusses the issue of diversity and inclusion by focusing on sexual orientation and gender identity. While this special section is primarily concerned with the diversity of Japanese-language educators, Arimori cautions that the promotion of the visibility of sexual/gender diversity in the profession should not be the end goal of this project, given that it is up to an individual how one identifies and represents themselves in workplace. Instead, as educators, we should strive for creating an inclusive learning environment where LGBTQ+ students will feel comfortable studying Japanese, and critically examine how our instructional materials and practices are contributing to the reinforcement of heteronormativity. Like Arimori, Arthur Mitchell also emphasizes that the alteration of representation currently seen in the field should not be considered a solution for the creation of an inclusive classroom. For instance, curtailing the presence of female L1 speaking Japanese teachers and introducing more white male L2 speaking teachers can actually end up contributing to the perpetuation of larger structures of oppression. Instead, he proposes our attention should be directed to the promotion of a teaching culture that fosters the critical evaluation of patriarchy, national chauvinism, and racial/gender hierarchy dictating the current conditions. Brian Dowdle also considers the intersectionality of various social categories by highlighting how academic identity shaped by our disciplinary training adds another dimension to this discussion. By sharing his experience as an “accidental language teacher” who was originally trained in Japanese literature but has been teaching Japanese language courses in addition to English-medium content courses, he calls attention to the possible distance, alienation, or marginalization sensed by “generalists” in “language educator” communities, which are dominated by those trained in Japanese language pedagogy. A transdisciplinary, rather

than an insular, mindset is called for in order to achieve a successful reevaluation of goals and curricula.

Finally, the last four commentaries explore ideas for the cultivation of the next generation of Japanese-language educators and the maintenance of a thriving and healthy professional community. Jessica Haxhi begins her discussion by aptly introducing the metaphor of a “funnel”—as opposed to a “pipeline”—to describe how only a small fraction of students can find a pathway for and sustain interest in becoming a Japanese-language educator. She then introduces a series of can-do statements to illustrate possible obstacles for diverse populations of students to consider Japanese language teaching as a career option and encourages each reader to consider how a “can’t do” be changed into a “can do.” In fact, Amy Ohta’s piece can be seen as a direct response to Haxhi’s call—it showcases what she and her colleagues are doing at their university to increase the students’ awareness of and enthusiasm for language teaching as a possible career path. Concrete ideas shared by Ohta include enhanced career advising, guest lectures by local Japanese-language teachers, a teaching internship program, and development and incorporation of instructional units or courses on language teaching and learning. Yo Azama, on the other hand, addresses how professional development can be sustained throughout the career of educators. He reports how eight Japanese-language teachers in his school district with diverse backgrounds practice inclusivity by forming a professional learning community where members are encouraged to exercise deep listening skills by withholding their own beliefs and creating space for other perspectives. The key elements of their practice shared in this commentary are deemed transferrable for the creation of synergetic collaborations among Japanese-language educators at local, state, and national levels. In the final piece, Suwako Watanabe shares her perspectives based on her experience of serving the Association of Teachers of Japanese (ATJ) and the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers (NCJLT), as well as AATJ, which was formed in 2012 as a result of the merger of ATJ and NCJLT. She critically evaluates the historical development of these associations and proposes several possible actions for AATJ to consider in order to address diversity and inclusion issues and to help enhance professional excellence for its membership.

4. What is Next?

Through this special section, we hope to encourage each reader to engage in critical reflection on their beliefs and professional practices. We also

hope that this forum will continue into the future, taking different formats and involving a growing number of people. There are numerous actions that can be taken at different levels and by different entities. At the organization level, for example, we hope to see concrete action plans discussed at national and international associations, such as AATJ and the Canadian Association for Japanese Language Education (CAJLE), as well as at regional organizations. Such plans may include a revision or creation of a position statement that clearly lays out organizational resolutions with regard to diversity and inclusion. They may also involve offering spaces and opportunities for continuing dialogs and professional development through conferences and symposia. At the institution level, each program through K–16 may reflect on and rectify their potentially undue practices in hiring, staffing, program coordination, curriculum development, and other mundane practices. Each program may have particular institutional cultures and structures, which may hinder systematic changes, or some programs may not have a sufficient number of Japanese-language specialists to work together for this cause. Rather than being discouraged, however, we should continue working on this reflection process and exploring possible changes by incorporating many of the important ideas discussed in the commentaries. For instance, the sharing of challenges and best practices with other programs on campus or within a district, as well as at regional and national meetings of the field mentioned above could yield some breakthroughs. Programs that offer teacher-training education may review their curricula and other training components that may be impactful to the preparation of future Japanese-language instructors. Finally, as individuals, we all can continue this conversation with our colleagues and students. It is from everyday practice that transformations begin in our classrooms and beyond. We sincerely hope that this forum serves a step toward this end.

NOTES

¹ In order to clarify the term “Japanese-language instructors,” not to be confused with “language instructors who are Japanese,” we used hyphenation. We used hyphenation for other similar terms, as well, such as “Japanese-language specialists” and “Japanese-language learners” in this essay. Contributors to this special section were also encouraged to follow this style as deemed appropriate.

² A brief summary of the survey results was also shared at the conclusion of AATJ 2019 spring conference.

³ We thank Brian Dowdle for calling our attention to this article.

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