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The Generalist's Dilemma: How Accidental Language Teachers Are at the Center of Japanese Pedagogy

Brian C. Dowdle

1. Introduction

In this age of increasing specialization in Japanese language teaching, being a generalist may feel akin to educational malpractice. Specialists with advanced training in Japanese language pedagogy often teach at large research universities (R1) with a bevy of faculty members, each of whom focuses on a single level or year of the Japanese language program. Generalists, in contrast, teach at smaller schools (regional universities/liberal arts colleges/community colleges) and must cover large swaths of both the Japanese- and English-based curriculum. Generalists may feel spread thin, trying to balance multiple teaching responsibilities. They may personally worry their students are getting a less than ideal language instruction compared to that provided by specialists.

This is not to imply that generalists are incompetent or unable to teach the Japanese language effectively; rather, I wish to argue the opposite—that they are powerful and invaluable. Generalists are important to the field and should be incorporated further into the archetype of Japanese-language educators. Rather than feeling like second-class citizens, generalists should feel celebrated. As I show, however, an examination of the generalist's dilemma provides a window into larger problems in Japanese language instruction and its relationship to Japan studies, more broadly.

2. The Nature of Generalism

2.1. The Academic Job Market and Generalists

As the academic job market continues to evolve, it is increasingly common to see advertisements for positions seeking generalists who teach all levels of Japanese from beginning to advanced, offer culture



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courses on Japan (or even China, Korea, and Asia more broadly), grow the program, provide outreach to the campus and community, and maintain a progressive research agenda. Needless to say, such positions are beyond the training capacity of even the longest graduate program. Yet, these are the highly coveted positions sought after by an ever-growing number of freshly minted Ph. D.s.

Overall, programs with generalists are actually more common than those at large institutions (those with six or more faculty members), although the exact divide is hard to determine. It is safe to anticipate that at universities offering four-year degrees in Japanese, the smaller the program, the greater the diversity of courses each faculty member would be expected to teach. Hence, smaller programs depend more on generalists who can wear a myriad of hats. It is well known that the budgets for humanities have stagnated or decreased. This has increased pressure on departments and individuals to do more with less, which, in turn increases the desirability of and pressure to be a generalist.

2.2. Academic Identity

Many generalists, especially those not initially trained as applied linguists, however, find themselves working as “accidental” Japanese-language teachers. Originally, they were trained in literature, film, or cultural studies, but due to the nature of the job market, they teach Japanese language courses along with so-called “content” courses. In their minds, they are first and foremost teachers of literature, film, or cultural studies. For instance, they might feel more at home at conferences such as AAS or the MLA and not participate in ACTFL or AATJ. As a result, they may not even have an academic identity of being a Japanese-language teacher, *per se*.

For “native-”speaking, L1 generalists, who likewise may have been trained in a field other than applied linguistics, the role of language teacher is also often as unexpected as it is unavoidable. The assignment or expectation to teach language is often the product of essentialist assumptions that being “native”-speaking alone qualifies one to teach that language. One would be hard pressed to find “native” English-speaking scholars of British literature or American film who are expected to teach ESL courses merely because they are “native” speakers. Yet, this idea retains currency, even as it is not new. Samuel made a similar observation in 1987: “Native speakers suffer from the myth, commonly embraced by students and even by some colleagues and administrators,

that they can teach the language efficiently simply because they are native speakers” (135).

Apart from finding themselves “accidentally” teaching Japanese, a further reason why generalists may choose to eschew the label of language teacher may be their experience in graduate school. Most if not all of the universities that granted their terminal degrees utilized a two-tiered system of faculty members. On the first tier were the tenure-track professors with Ph. D.s and on the second, lower tier were the non-tenurable language teachers without terminal degrees. Perhaps as students they picked up on micro-aggressions against “mere” language teachers by tenure-track faculty who privileged “content” courses as the sign of a successful academic career at a research university.

3. Larger Field Issues and Generalists

The demands faced by generalists point to two interrelated issues: the continued rewarding of “content” over language courses in tenure, teaching loads, and salary and the false dichotomy between language courses and so-called content courses.

3.1. Teaching Loads

The teaching loads of generalists are often skewed higher than their counterparts in non-language teaching positions, even when they have the same degrees. Not only is the number of courses taught per year higher (often 3/2, 3/3, 4/3, or even 4/4) but the total number of credit hours is normally higher since language courses continue to be four or five credits at the lower division. Hence, even when the number of courses is the same, language-teaching generalists are in the classroom for more hours than their non-language teaching counterparts in literature, film, or cultural studies departments. Despite more teaching responsibilities, salaries are often lower. (Such structural disincentives against generalists are still less than those faced by specialized language teachers, who are often on non-tenure track career paths working as adjuncts or for fixed terms, with far lower salary scales and limited job security.)

3.2. “Content Courses” vs. Japanese Language Courses

One advantage of embracing the generalist perspective is that it calls into question the divide between English-language “content courses” and Japanese language courses. Although the language classroom may have once been imagined as void of content, filled only with pure “content-

free” grammar, content-based language instruction (CBLI) is increasingly the norm after the intermediate level (See Douglas 2017 for a discussion of CBLI). But, the knowledge and facts of other disciplines have always been woven into language instruction. Generalists recognize the utility of language instruction to help expand cultural, historical, and literary studies. Their critical training may also help them avoid the temptation to teach caricatures of Japanese society and culture, which were a staple of *nihonjinron* heavy textbooks of yesteryear. Unwilling to abandon their fields of expertise, generalists embed literature, media studies, social science, linguistics, and history into their advanced language courses.

Being a generalist poses separate problems for so-called “native” (L1) and non-“native” (L2) speakers. I bracket the term “native” to highlight two things. First, although the term may be used to indicate proficiency in the language, it also is used to signal nationality as well. Even in 2019, jobs frequently list “nativeness” as a job requisite. Compare how much more welcoming verbiage requiring a “a deep knowledge of Japanese language and culture” is than that requesting “native or near-native proficiency in Japanese and English.” It should be noted that both phrases are from different job postings at the same university. This lingering preference for “native”-speaking teachers and prejudice against non-“native” speakers needs to be looked at in a larger conversation about the broader structure of Japan studies and the role of language instruction.

3.3. Marginalization of Generalists

Non-“native-”speaking generalists may feel doubly marginalized within the field of Japanese language pedagogy. Not only is their academic identity often something other than that of language teacher, but also, they do not match the dominant image of Japanese language educators. Considering that in North America 77.3% (and in Western Europe 74.6%) of all Japanese language teachers are “native” speakers of Japanese, this feeling of isolation makes sense (Japan Foundation 2017; see also Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki, this volume, for a broader discussion of these figures within the context of diversity.)

Rather than becoming less marginalized, non-“native” educators in 2019 seem to make up a smaller percentage of Japanese language teachers than they did forty years ago in 1981, when a similar survey was conducted (Samuel 1987). Then, only approximately sixty-five percent

(64.5%) were “native” teachers (133). Today’s numbers appear too high, and one contributing reason may be identity—namely, non-“native” teachers choose not to identify as language teachers and, thus, may have avoided answering the survey, causing their numbers to be under counted. But verifying this would require a more nuanced survey, which does not rely on self-identification.

Nevertheless, as Samuel pointed out in 1987, even today some schools “give priority to a native speaker of Japanese. A perception shared by these schools is that it is more beneficial for students to study the language under native educators. There is also an indication that some students share this view and exert pressure on departments to hire native teachers” (Samuel 1987:134). This pressure can make non-“native” generalists feel unwanted by students seeking an “authentic” teacher. (Unfortunately, anecdotally at least, it remains equally true that unfair preference is given to “native” English speakers in hiring faculty for culture courses. “Native” Japanese language ability is valuable for conducting research, but since teaching, mentoring, and administrative work is done in English, non-“native” English speaking candidates appear often discriminated against.)

Each of these two forms of marginalization (non-“nativeness” and lacking an academic identity as being a language teacher) invites a risky response. Attempting to counter marginalization, non-“native” teachers may feel pressure to conform to or even act out prescriptive Japanese cultural norms. This may be an attempt to prove their “nativeness.” However, they should not be expected to perform such idealized “Japanese-ness,” primarily because it does not exist. In contrast, “native” teachers may feel undue pressure to represent the entirety of Japanese people. In both cases, the diversity of acceptable behaviors and speech styles in Japan defy reduction into a singular stereotypical form of correct behavior and language to be modeled in the classroom. Moreover, it sets an unreasonably narrow depiction of what it means to be a Japanese speaker.

Non-“native” teachers potentially show students that they can be “themselves.” Both “native” and non-“native” teachers should be encouraged to model a range of speech styles to help students discover who they could be while speaking Japanese (see Gyogi 2016 for a larger discussion on speech style instruction). Allowing non-“native” educators to be themselves also models inclusivity and provides hope that the umbrella of Japanese speakers is inclusive enough to accommodate

students as non-“native” speakers. The narrow, overly prescriptivist, and Tokyo-centric view of Japanese language presented in many textbooks already is too limited to expect teachers to further reduce the spectrum of acceptable options. Instead, the models of generalists can help present the diversity of Japanese-language speakers. Non-“native” teachers can model for students more than just proper grammar; based on their own learning experiences—success and failures—they can advise students how and what to study to learn the language. Their encouragement, based on having “been there,” is often invaluable.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to address briefly the question of what the diversity of generalist teaching models to our students. On the one hand, from a negative perspective, it can create a false image of universal expertise. Students seeing generalists teach a wide range of courses might assume it reasonable that any one person could be an authority on everything from the sociolinguistic nuances of *keigo* in the workplace, to the literary depictions of the rise and fall of the Taira clan in the late-Heian period, to the intricacies of the modern tea ceremony as practiced by housewives of Tokyo in the 1960s. Not only are these levels of knowledge too specialized for expertise by any one individual, but also this is not how knowledge is structured and produced in the field. Although the basics of these areas may be learned through reading a few articles, expertise is the product of years of specialized training.

On the other hand, from a more positive perspective, diversity of instruction can also model patterns of learning that we want our students to learn. Generalists provide models of excellence in language as well as cross-cultural competencies. They show the values and skills of a liberal arts education with broad exposure to ideas and methodologies from across the fields comprising Japan studies. In fact, many of the most interesting research is interdisciplinary and generalist teaching fosters the making of connections in our students and for us as researchers.

Finally, generalists are connected to students across their entire educational experience, unlike faculty at large universities who may only meet students in literature or culture classes or at the upper levels in the language classes, if they even teach language. It is a pleasure seeing the full range of students’ growth as they evolve from struggling first-year students into more fluent and knowledgeable seniors.

Generalists face a dilemma: are they language teachers or are they teachers of another field? The answer is that they are both. Rather than feeling like second-class citizens, generalist should be celebrated and celebrate themselves. Generalists need to accept that they are a key contingent of Japanese-language educators. They should be encouraged to embrace their dilemma because it is part of the future of Japanese pedagogy and Japan studies in North America.

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