

〔研究ノート〕

Heritage Language and L2 Learning Connections: Views from within Japan

Erica Maria Muramoto and Angela Karsten

Abstract

Bearing in mind the Japanese context, this paper elaborates on how maintenance of international children's heritage language (HL) might contribute to the spread of bilingualism in the country. It also expands on the ways these young learners see themselves as well as how they are seen by their families and within their academic context. It is argued that young HL learners' propensity towards bilingualism might not only pave these children's way to the acquisition of a second and/or foreign language, but also contribute to future developments in foreign language learning among the monolingual sectors of society.

Keywords: heritage, language, bilingual, children, Japan.

Overview

In a world where there is great desire to become bilingual, i.e. having skills in more than one language, the idea that numerous people already possess such an ability might come as a surprise to many. Even though precise data on numbers are not available, Grosjean (2010) states, "Like many others, I have reported that half of the world's population, if not more, is bilingual" (p. 13). Bilingualism often becomes prevalent in societies where another major language is spoken as individuals make choices while learning and maintaining a HL (heritage language).

While acknowledging HL learning and maintenance as contributing factors for the spread of bilingualism, which in turn is considered to be one of Japanese society's main goals for the near future, this paper elaborates on how young HL learners see themselves within Japan and also on the ways they are seen within the Japanese language academic context and even within their own families. The young HL learners we are referring to here have been growing up in Japan, and once they become adults, they will be studying, working and raising their own children in the country. While most of these international children

consider Japanese as their first language and feel proud to be part of Japanese society, the maintenance of their HL might play a crucial role in helping the nation to further develop its international consciousness along with bilingualism. We argue that raising children's motivation at home and school towards keeping their HL might help boost their second and/or foreign languages skills as well. In addition, heritage language learners' propensity towards bilingualism might help to pave the way for future developments in foreign language learning among the monolingual sectors of society, since demand for a good command in two or more languages will likely be increased once more people possess such skills. Finally, there is a strong probability that once bilingualism is seen as commonplace within society, the worries concerning the minor languages will tend to decrease.

1. Heritage language and L2 (second/foreign language): Societies' users and learners

When thinking about HL and L2, different groups of users and learners can be found within most societies. Based on our own experiences as L2 educators as well as L2 learners, we label and discuss three of these groups here: 1. The Active HL Users 2. The Quasi-Active HL Users and 3. The Aspiring L2 Users. In the first group, Active HL Users are individuals who, while being part of a society where more than one language is spoken, find several opportunities to speak their heritage language (HL), in this case a language spoken by their ancestors which was preserved in society. As a matter of fact, nations where more than one language is spoken constitute a common phenomenon in today's world. As pointed out by Grosjean (2010), "...many countries are home to numerous languages: there are some 516 languages in Nigeria, according to *Ethnologue*, 427 in India, 275 in Australia, 200 in Brazil, 280 in Cameroon, and so on" (p. 6).

For example, this type of situation can be seen with children of immigrants (international students), who might find themselves in a process of forgetting or even losing their HL language. For that matter, Krashen (1998) states that even though most people believe that international children still speak their heritage language, the truth is that it is typically not maintained, is rarely developed and it could be in danger of being replaced by the majority language spoken outside the home. If this were to happen, there is a risk of not only losing the language itself but also the culture and heritage.

Constituting a third group are the Aspiring L2 Users. These are people who dream about being able to communicate in a language different than their own and usually implement plans to reach this goal, attending second/foreign language classes, for example. Cook and Singleton (2014), while describing their views on L2 users, point out that classroom language learners do not often use the second language in their lives, but are learning how to use it. They further state that these learners are "...learning how to become part of one of the groups of L2 users" (p.132). Becoming a bilingual speaker in a country where only one language is prevalent often helps individuals to ascend in society. As a result, skills in more than one

language are highly valued and pursued by many in such contexts.

2. HL and L2 users and learners in Japan

Considering the three groups described above, let us think now about which ones can be found in Japan. The first group worth to mention and which has become quite prevalent in the country is the one composed by the Aspiring L2 Users. In reality, the trend aiming at internationalization in Japan calls for measures that would provide people with more opportunities to acquire an L2. Despite the growing need for more bilingual speakers in the country, few Japanese have the chance to daily interact in two or more languages in order to improve fluency. With this in mind, the Japanese government has increased the number of English classes at public schools while putting forward a goal of 'Japanese with English Abilities', not as an imitation of a native speaker (MEXT, 2003).

This said, it is important to point out that there are already students attending Japanese schools who own the very skill of speaking different languages, even though English might not always be one of them. Finding support in Montrul (2012) who states that "Heritage languages refers to languages spoken by immigrants and their children" (p. 2), the children we are describing here are heritage language speakers whose parents are immigrants in Japan and who are often born and raised in the country. At this point it is worth to mention that even though the term heritage language is not commonly used within Japanese society, it can better describe the languages spoken by these children's families. In this sense, internationalization is already a fact in Japan, but as for the country's current internationalization needs, minority languages are not to be counted. While attending Japanese schools and embracing Japanese culture and language, children with a HL often have a hard time to keep alive the language that was passed on to them by their families, placing them in the group of Quasi-Active HL Users mentioned above. An inherited skill is for sure a terrible thing to waste, so the need for finding ways to connect these children to the goals of modern Japan is something society as a whole should consider.

3. Sharing the responsibility for children's heritage language loss

The same way adults divide their time among work, family and friends and from these interactions develop thoughts and personalities, children's daily lives also consist of spending moments with family, school and friends, consequently forming ideas about who they are and who they want to become. In Japan, children with a heritage language spoken at home learn at a very young age the meaning of living with more than one language and being different from others. Sadly said, there are times when these children's differences are seen as difficulties in one or more of their daily lives' contexts, i.e. sometimes the heritage language

gets pushed away by a lack of support on the part of schools and even parents. One of the reasons for this lack of support might be related to concerns over the effects of two languages brought up together within a child's life and mind, even though several publications argue in favor of bilingualism. Cook and Singleton (2014), for example, refer to this matter stating that:

Parents often worry about whether it is a good idea to bring up their children bilingually. There is no evidence that bilingualism itself harms a child; many argue that it brings unique advantages to the child in their ability to use language, to reason and to understand other people. (p. 5)

Furthermore, in what concerns parents of children with a HL in Japan, the situation of being employed for the most part in temporary work, subject to frequent layoffs and instability of income, might affect their willingness to deal with problems resulting from language and culture barriers. This feeling might then lead them to give in to monolingual educational programs which ensure their children to fast assimilate the major language, while weakening the family's HL. Many parents also believe that even if the child stops speaking the HL language, the situation will be solved once the family returns to their country. In a paper about immigration of Brazilian in Japan, Lask (2000), argues that such beliefs of a "magic" solution with the return to the homeland might be responsible for the low enrollment in some Brazilian schools referred to in the author's studies. Returning to the home country though is something that often does not happen soon in the lives of immigrants in Japan, causing their children to end up without opportunities to recover the HL.

Regarding the academic context, despite numbers showing the increase of international students enrolled in Japanese public schools for the last few decades (in 2014, 73,298 foreign nationals were found attending Japanese schools. This represents an increase of 1,744 compared to the previous investigation conducted in 2012 (MEXT, 2014). However based on these figures, there are still few policies aiming to support these students' HL languages. Also, not rarely, Japanese school teachers express their perturbation on foreign students' language abilities referring to them as *semiringaru* [semi lingual], *dabururimiteddo* [double limited], or *chutohampa* [half-way] bilinguals, when instead of being called just as *bairingaruru* [bilinguals] (Caltabiano, 2009). In Japan, regardless of the circumstances, international children of Japanese-Foreign parents are called as *haafu* [mixed race children]. On the other hand, Foreign-Foreign international children, even though sometimes born and raised in Japan, are also considered *Gaijin* [Foreigner]. Some studies suggest that this association just occurs in attribution to their unique linguistic, cultural or ethnic backgrounds (Shimizu & Shimizu, 2001; Takenoshita, 2005). Sometimes these experiences become unbearable to children, resulting in faster assimilation to Japanese culture and defensiveness in everything that relates to their ethnicity.

4. Benefits of maintaining children's heritage language

While acknowledging the importance of all school children to learn English as a foreign language and foreign students to learn Japanese as a second language, encouraging the maintenance of heritage languages can also bring benefits to students in general and society as a whole. In the case of heritage language users who are said to have a hard time acquiring Japanese for example, Muramoto (2016) suggests that there are strong connections between the acquisition of one's first and second languages, meaning that there is a high probability that students intending to learn Japanese as a second language might benefit from maintaining and acquiring additional skills, including literacy ones in their HL. In her studies, multilingualism maintenance could serve as a necessary watershed in successful cases of international students exceeding the obstacles during their educational process in Japan.

In addition, celebrating students' HL at school could contribute to reduce the anxiety towards learning Japanese that many of these children experience. As pointed out by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012) "One of the most consistent findings in the SLA literature is that highest levels of language anxiety are associated with lower levels of language achievement" (p 103). With this view in mind, there is a strong possibility that foreign students' anxiety towards Japanese language might influence their performance, resulting in poor school attendance and dropping out. Such situations could be prevented by reducing children's anxiety through encouragement towards the maintenance of their heritage language. Support for this idea comes with Enoi (2000), who focuses on the lack of measures taken by the Ministry of Education to guarantee mother tongue maintenance and instruction, pointing out that first language confidence must be maintained at same time as learning the Japanese language.

Another benefit that could be reached if more attention was given to students' HL concerns not only these children, but also their monolingual peers. Constant work in the form of raising students' awareness about foreign cultures and languages would eventually bear good fruit, since children often get influenced by their friends at school. What this means is that many international children in Japan feel there is no use for their additional language in society, and this situation could be reversed if these children were given encouragement towards keeping their HLs. By doing so, monolingual students would be influenced in a natural and positive way, resulting in a possible raise in their L2 motivation. Taking advantage of language skills brought to school by students with an HL seems like a clever way to pave the path to bilingualism in society. However, unlike countries such as the U.S and others where the educational system is decentralized and so facilitates the inclusion of immigrant students (Holloway & Yamamoto, 2003), Japanese public schools' programs submerge these children in approaches in which multilingualism and multiculturalism are not praised nor respected.

The successful increase in L2 motivation at schools might particularly benefit the studies of English,

which could gain children's attention in what concerns the language's position as a *lingua franca*. One could say that the problem of anxiety towards learning Japanese as a second language, common among some international students attending school in Japan, could be compared to the anxiety some Japanese students feel while attempting to learn a prestigious language like English. It seems only natural that if students as a whole were consistently exposed to foreign languages and cultures, bilingualism would start to be seen as commonplace within their schools and possibly within society in a near future.

5. Final remarks and suggestions

Several studies and surveys criticize the programs that are ill-suited for international children's needs in Japan. As foreign educators in the country, we are well aware that many, if not most, international parents often have to take the difficult decision of choosing monolingual dominance rather than balanced bilingual education programs for their children (Maxwell, 2008). With the expectation that these children will live permanently in Japan, Japanese schools offer a Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) sink-or-swim "submersion" approach in which survivors become heavily dominant in Japanese (McMahill & Muramoto, 2012). For many scholars, the problem arises at the same time international children are not impeded to enter Japanese public schools, but the reality lies in the fact that no one is officially in charge of supervising their education. Sakuma (2006) argues that corporations as well as government, have an ethical responsibility for the support of workers' families and the education of their children.

Another option for international children's parents are the ethnic schools however, the problem lies in the fact that using children's heritage language as the main means of instruction might not be enough to develop adequate academic Japanese abilities in order to continue on to higher education in the country, in case of a long or permanent stay of the family. Without the right to join compulsory education in Japan and with barriers for proper programs to be established at schools, international students' expectations are stagnant and outstanding results that could also benefit Japanese nationals can no longer be achieved. That is not to say there are no programs at all, the problem is that the ones which exist in Japan are not prepared to welcome international students.

So, at the moment, if parent's attitudes and behaviors are contrary to HL maintenance and language acquisition, international children will be at risk of losing their skills in the language as well as deleting connections with their foreign roots. For this reason, parents need to keep a positive attitude and adopt family strategies in order to support their international children's multilingualism. For Muramoto (2016) the whole family is in a danger of having the natural cycle of their lives modified due to the lack of one or more languages that constitute their natural realities of multiculturalism. Parents are also the ones who need to think of ways to accommodate these children's necessities, without having to leave the country while

preserving their heritage language. These parents' attitudes might result in important changes and also discoveries of new ways to educate international children in Japan.

The preservation of an heritage language can also be achieved by associating it to its culture. In her paper, Alzayed (2015) shares some suggestions with parents on how to preserve children's cultural identity (pp. 265-266) that could be almost fully exploited in Japan. For the author, religion is the most vital key factor in any culture and can be a great way to keep the cultural spirit alive. Parents can also read books, remind children about their country's holidays, and attend their community's festivals in order to help their children make friends and become aware of their country's traditions. Simple things such as sharing families' stories and cultural background, besides using the heritage language at home, can deeply influence children to remain interested in their origins and consequently their HL. Making return trips to the homeland is also one of the best means for heritage language maintenance (Hinton, 1998) and cultural identity.

Unfortunately, the literature is rife with examples of criticism of foreign children's education and little is known of international children and their parents' efforts to overcome all the difficulties encountered in Japan. While government-sponsored reports come out sporadically and most of the time with a critical point of view that results in nothing else than further red tape, many positive attitudes from parents concerned with the preservation of their children's international identity, especially through their HL, are seen to compensate for the lack of public assistance. If available, a well-organized program promoting language diversity could also help Japan to increase its linguistic capability instead of lamenting its incompetence in foreigner language learning. After all, Japan's future is closely associated to contributions that all children, regardless of their roots, can offer to the country. Fostering young heritage language users' bilingual skills might help Japan to gradually turn bilingualism into a social reality, and taking advantage of such a context constitutes a wise way to accomplish the country's goals.

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日本における継承語と第2言語習得との関連性

ムラモト エリカ マリア
カルステン アンジェラ

要 旨

本稿では、今日の日本の言語教育のあり方を理解した上で、外国につながるのある子どもたちの継承語（HL）維持が日本のバイリンガリズムにどう貢献し得るかを述べる。ヤングリーダーである彼らはどのような自身のイメージを持っているか、家族から期待されているか、また学校の中ではどのような存在であるかという議論に発展させた。バイリンガリズムによる継承語習得は、彼らの第二言語や外国語習得を助長するだけでなく、モノリンガルの日本社会における外国語習得のあり方にも貢献し得る可能性を秘めていることが検討される。