

Potential interactions in community-based Japanese language classes

Extending the borders of *contact situations*

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Recently multiculturalism has become a key issue in many local communities in Japan. According to Ozaki (2006:43), Japanese language support in local communities will soon become the central issue in the field of Japanese language education nationwide. This trend is most noticeable in urban areas which contain many learners with varied backgrounds and needs. This article examines one such community: a city on the outskirts of the Tokyo metropolis with a growing number of registered foreigners. Several volunteer groups have set up Japanese language classes to support the local foreign workers and their families, foreign relatives of Japanese nationals, Chinese returnees and immigrants of Japanese descent. However, compared to other areas with a concentration of foreign residents and linguistic minorities, the problems surrounding foreign residents in this city do not yet seem to be widely understood by local mainstream Japanese. The purpose of this article is to determine if the interactions between the foreign learners and Japanese volunteers participating in these classes can be used to reconsider the initial, simplistic division between them such as ‘foreign’ and ‘Japanese’ residents.

Community-based Japanese classes are commonly defined as one of the contact situations between Japanese and foreigners, or understood as a gateway for foreigners/non-native speakers to local community. These classes can be considered ‘compensation education’ (Yamada 1997:144-145), as they are organized and maintained by local volunteer groups in lieu of official government support. However, this author believes that these classes play another important role. The participants who gather once a week have the potential to gradually develop personal relationships with each other through a number of interactions. These would make serious problems experienced by learners of Japanese more visible and lead the participants – especially Japanese volunteers – to extend their given limits of their everyday life and to recognize that each of them is responsible for those problems.

This article outlines the process of developing relationships in Japanese classes run by one of the volunteer groups in the above-mentioned community by close analysis of the classroom discourses. In the classes people participating in conventional school-like activities initially do not share the same desire to create a place for mutual learning or

developing interpersonal relations. Despite the pre-agreement that the classes are set for learning Japanese, the participants frequently suspend their agreed roles, i.e. learner and volunteer, and shift position to different temporary roles according to circumstances. They then negotiate for equal opportunity to take part in conversation and turn-taking, or begin a self-narrative. The learners, who in daily life are usually seen as the minority and prevented from talking freely in their familiar languages, seek out opportunities to express themselves in the classroom. Usually, compared to the learners' first person narratives, the Japanese volunteers often begin a monologue about the Japanese society and/or Japanese language and tend to generalize their talks by automatically integrating themselves to majority Japanese. This would be firstly because they believe that they should support learners as native speakers of Japanese, and secondly because they do not wish to reveal their feeling of weakness arising from being constantly evaluated by learners' unstable attendance. While listening to those monologues as the audience, learners are trying to focus on their interlocutor's view or way of thinking based on their own personal experience. In situations where learners draw out volunteers' 'self' by interaction, both learners and volunteers become co-tellers/ producers by sharing their own stories. Following this, a fixed boundary between Japanese/foreigners or native/non-native speakers becomes fluid and may be dissolved temporarily. It is at this point that the participants work together to reinvent the classes as contact situations.

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