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From 'Monolithic Named Languages' to 'Plurilithic Idiolectal Repertoire': Reconceptualising 'language' in Japanese language education – Practical application and reflection

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1. Introduction

A recent development in the field of Applied Linguistics attempts to reconceptualise language - from *monolithic named languages* to *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire*[1]. This paper presents a practical report, where we apply this theoretical development into actual Japanese language curriculum at one of the HE institutions in the UK. By showing concrete examples of the final year Japanese language modules, we critically examine our attempts of embracing students' *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire* in the module design and assessment.

Although this project is still at an early stage, we hope that sharing the theory-based practice will lead to future curriculum improvements and similar initiatives in other institutions. This report therefore also proposes future directions in addition to summarising prospects and challenges based on our experiences and reflections.

2. Literature review

A recent development in the field of Applied Linguistics emphasises the *heterogeneity of language* (Kubota 2016) and attempts to shift the focus on language users who have agency to utilise their own linguistic repertoire to make meaning in social interaction. Pennycook (2009), for instance, emphasises the need of transcending the traditional *monolithic* view towards language and coins a new term, *plurilithic* notion of language. Similarly, the term, *translanguaging,* in which individuals deploy 'their full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages' (Otheguy, Garcia & Reid 2015: 283), has been discussed widely in the field of multilingualism, and more recently in the broader field of Applied Linguistics.

Despite the theoretical development, the monolingual and monolithic attitude towards language remains strong in language teaching and learning contexts (May 2014). The monolingual discourse, for instance, has been continuously constructed through idealising 'native speaker' competence in contrast to 'non-native speakers,' and through assessing language learners against monolingual 'native speaker' competence scales. The reality that those second language learners are – or will be – bilingual/multilingual is thus rendered invisible (Ortega 2014). The terms such as *first* and *second language* also reproduce the monolingual ideology of "language as static, standardized competencies one might 'acquire'" (Vogel & García 2017: 3). Focusing on English language education contexts, Hall and Cunningham also urge us to distinguish what they call as *N-English* "where the 'N' suggests named, national, normed, and native" (Hall & Cunningham 2020: 10), from *idiolectal repertoire for languaging,* which recognizes the unique situated interaction between specific groups of language users' "shared or unshared experiences and identities" (Hall 2014: 383). The verb *languaging*, reinforces us to pay attention to "the process of making meaning, and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain 2006: 98). Hall and Wicaksono (2024) highlight the needs for teachers to understand the differences between *speaking English* from *being English*, and reconceptualise language education from teaching *regulations* (i.e., prescriptive norms) to *regularities* (i.e., recurring patterns), and from teaching *correctness* to *appropriateness*.

As seen above, the paradigm shift from *monolithic named languages* to *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire* has

been discussed largely in the field of multilingualism, and English language education – specifically from critical discussion in the areas of World Englishes and English as Lingua Franca; however, it is not much so in the other language teaching and learning contexts. To fill this gap, we share the concrete examples of the curriculum and assessment in Japanese language education in this report, in which we attempted to embrace the *heterogeneity of language* and considered a language learner as an active agent who utilises their own *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire*.

3. Educational contexts and backgrounds

The educational context which we focus on in this report is Japanese language curriculum and assessment at one of the HE institutions in the UK. The students study Japanese and linguistics for four years on the undergraduate programmes, including one year study abroad in Japan in their third year. The Japanese degree programmes have two different routes: *BA in Japanese, TESOL and Linguistics*, or *BA in Japanese, Intercultural Communication and Linguistic*s.

This report will focus on the final year (fourth year) Japanese language modules at the post Study Abroad stage. These modules are called Japanese Language Project 1 (JLP1) and Japanese Language Project 2 (JLP2). JLP1 runs in the first semester, 44 contact hours in total (4 hours per week for 11 weeks), followed by JLP2 in the second semester, 45 contact hours in total (5 hours per week for 9 weeks). It is also noted that we, the module leaders, have research backgrounds in Applied Linguistics, and also teach academic modules in linguistics on these programmes.

4. Practical application: embracing students' *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire* into the curriculum

Although we have two independent modules across different semesters, we designed them as a yearly curriculum and consider them as a set. The aim of JLP1 in semester 1 is to raise students' awareness of complexities and diversity of Japanese language. This comes at a good time as most of the students just return from Study Abroad before taking this module, which enables the students to reflect their own repertoire in depth. Following this, the focus of JLP2 moves on for the students to 'utilise' their *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire* effectively to express themselves for specific purposes. In both modules, we employ CLIL-style [Content and Language Integrated Learning] teaching pedagogy in principle.

4.1 JLP1 in Semester 1: Raising students' awareness of diversity in Japanese

In JLP1, the students are introduced to key topics in Japanese sociolinguistics and pragmatic and Japanese for academic purposes. The module was developed with having in mind that our students have covered the basics of linguistics in their first year, developed their knowledge and learned application of a variety of analysis methods in the areas of sociolinguistics and pragmatics in their second year through academic modules in linguistics. The final year Japanese module gives the students the opportunity to apply their linguistic knowledge to Japanese materials and to do that in Japanese, furthering both their linguistic and Japanese language skills. This kind of design is possible thanks to the tutors' and students' background in linguistics. The topics covered in class pull from a range of linguistic areas; this includes, for example, speech style and politeness, gendered language and *yakuwarigo* [role language], characteristics of and attitudes towards dialects and second-language users of Japanese, a variety of speech acts (complimenting, thanking, apologising, requesting), and internet slang.

This module is striving to raise awareness of the diversity of Japanese through focusing on linguistic topics and authentic materials[2] that inevitably include diverse speakers and a range of contexts. Any language characteristics discussed are not introduced as *prescriptive rules* but critically through academic literature and discussions where the students can draw from their *idiolectal repertoires*, and their linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge and awareness. The students are required to reflect on things like the context, the relationship of the

speakers, any specific effects the speakers are trying to bring about, the appropriateness in that specific situation, and how these have an impact on the language use.

To mitigate the challenging content, topics are first introduced through a pre-reading task of an academic journal article or book chapter in English which is then discussed in class, followed by practicing analysis. The language used in this part is mainly English to allow students to fully express their experiences and linguistics knowledge, and use their analytical skills. In the next part, we focus on authentic materials in Japanese, where the students can read/listen and discuss more about the topic and try to analyse the text in Japanese. The students are encouraged to make links to their own experience and *idiolectal repertoires* in the discussions. For example, the students not only reflect on slang and dialect, formal/informal or other different contexts of language use that they have experienced in Japan, but also make connections with any other language experience in their repertoire.

There are two components of the assessment: a research report in Japanese and a speaking test. For the research report the students need to select authentic materials in Japanese, and conduct an analysis of the materials based on the topics, discussions, and analytical frameworks that were covered in class. The focus should be on how the language is used according to the context, audience, appropriateness, and/or intended effect. The materials that the students analyse could include TV shows, films, anime, manga, novels, video games, YouTube videos, commercials, and advertisements. The followings are some concrete examples of materials and analyses the students chose: looking at the use of gendered language or dialect of certain characters in fictionalised media, language characteristics of non-Japanese characters or any adjustments of other characters when interacting with them, change of speech style between the participants in a reality show as their relationship develops. For the speaking test, the students present a summary of their project which is followed by some questions about the presentation, and then free conversation surrounding the topics covered in class.

4.2 JLP2 in Semester 2: Utilising their *plurilithic idiolectal repertoire* for *languaging*

JLP 2 in semester 2 covers the content of Japanese for professional purposes. However, this does not mean that the content follows the so-called 'Business Japanese' and its Know-How (*prescriptive rules*), rather the objective is to consider carefully the *appropriateness* of the language (*recurring patterns*), depending on the workplace contexts and purposes of the communication. More specifically, although the basic *regulation* about honorifics and how they are 'typically' used are taught in class, we attempt to understand honorifics as fluid and situated, where people could for example speak more casually, to signal friendliness and closeness, rather than a *prescriptive-rule*-based system. We also discuss that the use of honorifics depends strongly on the work culture and interpersonal relationship, and how people *style shift* their speech during their interactions.

As mentioned earlier, we employ the CLIL-style pedagogy on this module, and in addition to 'language,' we also aim for the students to learn 'content.' For this module, the content objective is for the students to reflect on their study at university and articulate their transferable skill sets and experiences they gained, in order to plan their future after graduation. The professional and employability focused curriculum has been recently promoted through the national initiatives in Higher Education. Thus, content and language are both integrated as important aspects on this module, and this has been also reflected in the assignments, which has two components: a mock job interview (speaking test), and the project portfolio. To complete these assignments, the students need to identify an authentic job advertised in Japan, which aligns closely with their interests and future path. For the mock job interview, they will prepare a two-minute self-promotion speech, followed by questions from the examiner who acts as their future employer. Although it is a 'mock' interview, the students are required to reflect on their actual experiences and the skill sets they have and pitch specifically for the job requirements. In this process, they are also required to do some research on their chosen workplace and adjust the 'content' and 'language' appropriately for the job interview at their chosen workplace. The second component, portfolio, consists of multiple elements, but for the purpose of this report, we will focus on the two main elements: a workplace spoken-interaction video and a video commentary (research report) in Japanese. For the video, the students are required to research the 'typical' spoken interactions expected for their chosen workplace. They then design the role-play scenario with

very specific contexts, and film themselves acting these roles. In this 3-minute video, the students must demonstrate their understanding of the diversities/complexities in Japanese language such as formality, politeness, and varieties of Japanese. In the video commentary, they need to explain, for instance, what kind of research they did to learn typical spoken interactions expected at the chosen workplace, and how creatively they designed the 'imagined' interactors and their interpersonal relationship, and how they make their 'language' and 'content' *appropriate* to the specific contexts and scenario they design.

5. Reflection: the prospects and challenges

Reflecting our experience, we believe that JLP1 in semester 1 made the students cognitively more aware of diversity in Japanese and made them a good 'observer' of how language is used in the real world (i.e., its *plurilithic* nature), rather than overly relying on the *monolithic* textbook descriptions and explanations of language. Following this, in JLP2, we have noticed that many students were able to utilise their rich *idiolectal repertoires* in their assessment, particularly in the final portfolio project. As the portfolio video assessment gave them room to creatively set up concrete scenes, some students managed to fully utilise their *idiolectal repertoires* which are often overlooked in the traditional type of language assessment. For instance, one student who chose an English language teaching job for pre-school age children in Kansai region demonstrated their knowledge of formal and informal use of language, *translanguaging* between English and Japanese during the class depending on the purpose and teaching content, adjusting the intonation and speaking speed for getting small children's attention. In addition, this student used their knowledge in Kansai-region varieties in informal interactions with children. The students' knowledge in the regional variations, which developed through their experiences, is usually marginalised and underrepresented in traditional language education, especially in the assessment. Interestingly, many students chose jobs in the areas in Japan where they spent their year abroad as their future job's location for this assessment. This is one piece of evidence that the students have developed their *idiolectal repertoire*, which was formed through authentic interactions during the study abroad, and had an impact on their affiliations and identity formation. Other examples of student work highlighted the nature of *speech style shift*. The students explored in semester 1 how in naturally occurring situations the *desu/masu* and plain form not only index politeness and non-politeness or formality – *a prescriptive rule* often used in textbooks, but a variety of social meanings (Cook 2018). In some student videos, although they were interacting with the same person, depending on the moment-to-moment context, the students consciously alternated between the various *speech styles*. In the video commentary, we could also observe the students' thinking process of how they justified the *appropriateness* of the specific language use for specific contexts and purposes. Judging the *appropriateness* is not straightforward in comparison to the notion of *correctness* (i.e., *prescriptive norms*), since we constantly need to monitor how language is used in real life situations (i.e., *recurring patterns*) as it could change from time to time. We as tutors believe that the students had an opportunity to develop this important skill set through our curriculum.

Despite some success, we also encountered challenges, especially in assessing the students' *idiolectal repertoire for languaging.* First, this kind of curriculum seems to be more suitable to upper-intermediate learners and above who have rich *idiolectal repertoire*. This curriculum worked well as our students had been exposed to authentic language interactions during the year abroad. Kinginger (2013: 4), for instance, points out that the study abroad broadens the students' repertoire as the students "become more aware of register and style, develop greater autonomy as conversationalists, and incorporate fluency-enhancing formulaic language into their speech." Their rich *idiolectal repertoire* and experiences enable them to engage with *languaging*, to develop the capacity to reflect on the complexities of language, and to make a judgement on the *appropriateness*. Although we believe that it is still possible to introduce this kind of curriculum with the lower-proficiency language learners such as through a creative video component, we need to be aware that their *idiolectal repertoire for languaging* and the capacity to justify *appropriateness* are still limited. The second challenge was how we develop the marking criteria which evaluate *appropriateness of languaging* rather than *correctness of language*. Traditional marking criteria often involve native-speaker benchmarks based on *prescriptive rules*, and we are still in the process of developing

marking criteria which is suitable to assess *appropriateness of languaging*. We also believe that it is important to evaluate the students' process of language practices and how they develop and utilise their *idiolectal repertoire*, rather than only assessing their final outputs. It is also necessary to set up concrete contexts and purposes for communication, in order to assess *appropriateness* of the language use, as *appropriateness* is context-dependant. The video commentary, for instance, worked well for this purpose and we could evaluate their intention behind the setting of concrete contexts, interactors including their interpersonal relationship, and their justification of *appropriateness*. Setting the concrete contexts can be initiated by teachers at the lower level, but for the higher level, the students may be able to set it up by themselves. Third challenge was the bottom-up nature in the curriculum development, thus not directly applicable to different educational contexts. In order to set up suitable curriculum and assessment, it is inevitable for teachers to understand students' *idiolectal repertoires* and their practical needs for using language, so the assessment includes meaningful and effective *languaging practices*. As Hall (2014: 383) discussed, this kind of proficiency "must be locally tuned and sensitive to users' individual needs and identities."

6. Conclusion

Notwithstanding some challenges, we felt that the *plurilithic approaches to language and languaging* have potential to become the future of language education in the rapidly changing world. First, it enables the language learners' autonomy in language learning, and encourage their creative and proactive engagement with *languaging* process and practices. Teachers play more of a facilitator role, who support their students to explore the complexities of language and learn from the authentic *languaging* they can observe, instead of an authoritative-knowledgeable person who knows everything about language. Canagarajah (2013) problematises the neglect of local knowledge in language education – students know better than teachers some aspects of language, and we need to acknowledge such aspects in language education. Secondly, *plurilithic* approaches also challenge native-speakerism and also incorporate marginalised varieties in language which had been overshadowed by 'standard-language' teaching and assessment. This aspect has a connection to 'decolonisation of curriculum' in the language education (Sato-Rossberg 2023).

Although this project remains in its preliminary stages, we anticipate that disseminating our theory-informed practice will contribute to future curriculum development and stimulate comparable initiatives across other institutions and beyond Japanese language education. We plan to progress our project further, creating opportunities where we can share the practical applications together[3].

Notes

[1] In the BATJ annual conference in 2024, we have translated and introduced these terms as 一元的言語観 [*monolithic named languages*] and 多元的言語観 [*plurilithic idiolectal repertoire*] in Japanese.

[2] Materials made for Japanese-speaking audience generally rather than solely for Japanese language learning.

[3] As part of this initiatives, we founded a Special Interests Group in BATJ in 2024 called 'Diversity of Japanese Language' in Japanese language education [日本語教育における「日本語の多様性」勉強会]. More information at: https://batj.org.uk/special-interest-groups/diversity/

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