

# Negotiating Multiple Identities in Heritage Language Learning: Learners of Vietnamese in Higher Education in Japan

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# **Negotiating Multiple Identities in Heritage Language Learning: Learners of Vietnamese in Higher Education in Japan**

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## **Abstract**

As Japan is fast transforming into a multilingual and multicultural society, it will be important for educators to find better ways to accommodate the needs of minority students. While there is a substantial amount of research on the education for immigrant children of school age, studies on heritage language (HL) learners in Japanese higher education are rare. This study investigated the multiple identities of HL learners of Vietnamese who are majoring in their HL at Japanese universities. The findings revealed that HL learners' multiple identities are constantly being shaped, developed and negotiated in the course of their language learning. The diversity and uniqueness of the HL learners in this study speak of the need for HL educators in Japan to develop a curriculum sensibly tailored to their needs and challenges with pedagogical considerations.

## **Introduction**

As of December 2019, the number of foreign residents in Japan was 2,933,137, compared to 2,186,121 in 2009 (Ministry of Justice). With a rapidly expanding population of foreigners in Japan, students with non-Japanese parent(s) are on the rise at all levels of education. Consequently, Japan's cultural and linguistic diversification is likely to proceed at an accelerated pace throughout the country.

Numerous past studies have investigated the situations of children of recent immigrants, or newcomers, from sociolinguistic, socioeconomic, sociocultural and/or socioeducational perspectives (Aramaki et al., 2017; Kondo et al., 2019; Majima, 2019; Nakajima, 2010; Shimizu, 2011). Yet, few attempts have been made to shed light on youth who are studying the language of their parents' home country in academic settings. While most immigrant children are presumably learning their parents' home language because the parents wish to pass down their heritage to the younger generation, adolescent learners are more likely to choose or not to choose to study the language themselves. Similarly, their identity can affect their language learning in a more significant way. This study, therefore, focuses on the younger generations of recent immigrants who decided to major in their heritage language (HL) at universities in Japan, with the aim of exploring in-depth how their multiple identities are shaped, developed and negotiated in the course of their language learning.

## **Multiculturalism and Identity**

At the center of the discussion of HL education lies the notion of multiculturalism, which Pathak (2008) describes as the celebration of difference in contemporary life. In addition to "difference", as Race (2011) points out, the concept of "identity" is an important factor for promoting cultural diversity. The relationship between identity and second or heritage language learning has been researched by many scholars in different fields (e.g., Block, 2007; Duff & Li,

2014; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Leeman, 2015; Norton, 2000; Sugita, 2000)

In his account of multicultural education, Race (2011) introduces four concepts; assimilation, integration, multiculturalism, and anti-racism. Assimilation is “a one-way process of absorption whereby minorities abandon, at least publicly, their ethnic identities” (Coelho, 1998, pp.19-20). In the case of the U.S., for example, the government historically focused its attention on the education of immigrants in the 1950s through the 1970s, when immigrants entering the country were encouraged to become American, subjugating their original culture.

The second concept, “integration”, sees the processes of social interaction as a two-way affair, “where members of the majority community as well as immigrants and ethnic minorities are required to do something” (Modood, 2007, p.48). Yet, like assimilation, the integration process is dominantly controlled by the nation state, or the mainstream society. In the 1970s and 1980s, the third concept of multiculturalism and multicultural education assumed importance in the U.S. and England. Anthias and Yuval-Davies (1993) argue that multiculturalism emerged as a result of the realization that the ‘melting-pot’ doesn’t melt, and that ethnic and racial divisions in fact get reproduced as generation proceeds. Finally, the advocates of anti-racism, as pointed out by Race (2011), attempted to address racism within education. They were critical about the weaknesses of multiculturalism in the sense that it failed to provide anti-racist education in multi-racist Britain.

In discussing HL education, the current study takes the multicultural perspective, which regards inclusion and diversity as its principles for inquiry, while simultaneously incorporating an anti-racist perspective.

### **Definition of Heritage Language Learners/Speakers**

The term “heritage language” has been defined in various ways by researchers in the field. Valdés (2001), from a linguistic point of view, defines a heritage language learner as a bilingual

in English and a home language other than English, with varying degrees of proficiency in the home language. Valdés' earlier work was placed primarily in the American context, in which the focus was predominantly on the HL education for Spanish-speaking immigrant students. Polinsky (2018) defines an HL speaker as "a simultaneous or sequential (successive) bilingual whose weaker language corresponds to the minority language of their society and whose stronger language is the dominant language of that society" (p.9). In contrast to these linguistically oriented views, Hornberger and Wang (2008) highlight the importance of learners' self-recognition and claim that it is the learner himself/herself who determines whether or not he/she is a heritage language learner.

This study takes the latter position suggested by Hornberger and Wang (2008), assuming that the learner's identity plays a significant role in studying their HL. The distinction between the linguistically and socially oriented views can also be related to the notions of "circumstantial bilingualism" and "elective bilingualism", as suggested by Baker and Wright (2017). Circumstantial bilinguals are, in many cases, forced or required to study another language, whereas elective bilinguals choose to learn the language. This study, focusing on university students who decided to major in their HL, will therefore be centered on "elective bilingualism."

### **Prior Research on Minority/Heritage Language Learners in Japan**

Maher (1997) provides an overview of the debates on education for linguistic minorities in Japan, referring to the historical movement towards linguistic diversity within Japan, in relation to the education in English, Korean, Chinese, Ainu, Ryukyuan, and Japanese sign language.

In recent years, more scholars have been interested in the ways to protect the human rights of minority children (Aramaki et al., 2017), to establish a more appropriate educational

framework towards a multicultural society (Tsuneyosi et al., 2011), and to provide better HL education for foreign-rooted children (Kondo et al., 2019). A number of studies also deal with education for the children of specific minority groups such as Brazilians (Serrano & Shibuya, 2019; Terashima & Kawata, 2003; Watanabe, 2010) and Vietnamese (Nishikawa, 2011; Kondo & Shimizu, 2019; Than, 2017). However, as pointed out by Nishikawa (2019), we rarely find research conducted in Japan, but for a few concerning Chinese as a heritage language (Majima, 2019; Ogawa, 2020) that investigate HL learning by the youth such as university students, who, unlike children, can make decisions regarding whether or not to study their HLs. The current study will explore the landscape of HL learning by students with ethnic roots in Vietnam, who are majoring in Vietnamese at several universities in Japan. Among various minority languages spoken in Japan, Vietnamese was selected for this study because the Vietnamese population is growing fast throughout the country.

### **Vietnamese in Japan**

There were two periods of influx of Vietnamese into Japan. The first group was refugees, or the boat people, who arrived in the country in May 1975. From 1978 to 2006, the Japanese government officially accepted more than 11,000 refugees from Indochinese areas, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Two centers were established to support their settlement, one in Himeji city in Hyogo prefecture and the other in Yamato city in Kanagawa prefecture. The children of those refugees grew up in Japan, speaking fluent Japanese and acting just like other Japanese youth.

The second period is the recent surge of Vietnamese immigrant workers as “technical trainees.” The population of Vietnamese in Japan grew tenfold in the past decade, from 41,000 in 2009 to 418,625 in 2019 (Ministry of Justice, 2010, 2020). According to Kawakami (2015), within the Vietnamese communities there are groups from the northern parts of Vietnam, the

southern parts, and also a certain population of Chinese origin, making the entire community linguistically and culturally diverse.

## **Study**

### 1) Purpose

The current study is a part of a larger research project titled “Investigating multi-ethnic students’ learning of their heritage languages at Japanese universities” funded by Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research, which involves HL learners of three Southeast Asian Languages (e.g., Vietnamese, Thai, and Indonesian) in Japanese higher education. The primary purpose of this project is to examine how HL learners view their identities and position themselves in different roles in the context of Japan and how the interactional variables influence the creation of their identities and repositioning through the study of their HL.

### 2) Research Questions

To illustrate the relationship between Vietnamese HL learners’ multiple identities and their language learning in higher education, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do the students’ family backgrounds and socio-educational characteristics influence their positioning themselves as a Vietnamese major at a university?
2. How does such positioning interact with their other characteristics in continuing/maintaining their HL identity?

### 3) Research Sites and Participants

Three Japanese universities are the sites for this study: one private (University A) and two national universities (University B and C), each of which has a Vietnamese major. University A is middle-sized, specializing in foreign languages and located in a suburb of Tokyo.

University B has several campuses in Osaka, and University C is located in Tokyo.

The researcher obtained consent for participation in this study from one student of each university, who has at least one Vietnamese parent. Rin is a female freshman studying at University A, Kai a male freshman at University B, and Shin is a male senior at University C. Both parents of Rin and Shin, as well as Kai's mother, are Vietnamese, but Kai's father is Japanese. The three participants' demographic profiles are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profiles of the Three Participants*

	Age/ Gender	Year/ Univ	Parents' ethnic background	Language background	Dominant language	Upbringing
1. Rin	18/ F	1/ Univ A	F: Vietnamese (Naturalized as Japanese) M: Vietnamese	1st: Vietnamese (Until she started nursery schooling) 2nd: Japanese	Japanese	Born and grew up in Chiba
2. Kai	18/ M	1/ Univ B	F: Japanese M: Vietnamese	1st: Japanese 2nd: Vietnamese	Japanese	Born and grew up in Hyogo
3. Shin	22/ F	4/ Univ C	F: Vietnamese M: Vietnamese	1 <sup>st</sup> : Vietnamese (until 5 <sup>th</sup> year and lost most of it) 2 <sup>nd</sup> : Japanese	Japanese	Born and grew up in Kanagawa

4) Data Collection

First, preliminary survey questions were sent to the three participants and their Vietnamese parent(s), and their responses were compiled before conducting semi-structured individual interviews. Follow-up questions were sent to each participant a few days later, to clarify what they meant in some parts of the interviews. All the verbal data from the interviews were audio-



recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively.

## **Findings**

### 1) Rin's Interactive Context

Both parents of Rin are originally from Vietnam, but her father came to Japan at an early age with his family and is now a naturalized Japanese. He has no difficulty in using Japanese and looks no different than other Japanese, she says. Her mother, on the other hand, came to Japan after puberty. She feels more comfortable speaking in Vietnamese than Japanese and on some occasions, requires assistance from Rin with her daily routines. Rin's two younger sisters, twins, are high school students. Both are at a rebellious stage and often talk back to their mother. As her sisters' proficiency in Vietnamese is not as high as Rin's, and her mother has limited Japanese competency, she is often in a position of having to mediate between her mother and her sisters.

As the oldest daughter, Rin has a strong sense of responsibility and independence. Her desires to support her mother seem to be the central motivation for her decision to study Vietnamese at a university. As Rin improved her Vietnamese after entering university, she became more comfortable and confident about travelling to Vietnam by herself and spending time with her relatives there, of whom she feels particularly close to a female cousin, whom she considers her real "*Onee-chan* (= older sister)." Rin says she wants to be closer to her cousin by studying Vietnamese harder. Through her interaction with her Vietnamese cousin, Rin became interested in the Vietnamese pop culture, which also contributes to her motivation for learning Vietnamese.

Another aspect of Rin's sense of affiliation with the Vietnamese arises from her mother's close connection with the local Vietnamese community, with Rin often participating in the events with her mother.

In her major at the university, she has a classmate who too has an ethnic background in Vietnam. While she is happy to have someone with whom she can share her experiences, Rin perceives the classmate's proficiency in Vietnamese more advanced than her own.

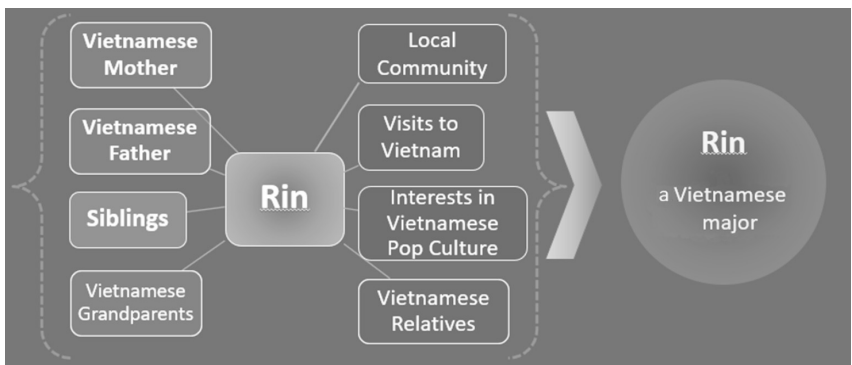
**Table 2**

*Rin's Interactive Context*

Family	Local Community and Parents' Home Country
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vietnamese mother</li> <li>• Vietnamese father</li> <li>• Two siblings: Younger twin sisters</li> <li>• Vietnamese grandparents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular visits to parents' home country</li> <li>• Participating in local Vietnamese community with mother</li> <li>• Interest in Vietnamese pop culture</li> <li>• Contacts with relatives in Vietnam</li> </ul>

**Figure 1**

*Motivational Factors for Rin's HL Learning*



2) Kai's Interactive Context

Kai is an only child born to a Japanese father and a Vietnamese mother. His mother is so

affectionate to her son that she accompanied him when the researcher met Kai for the first interview. During the interview, Kai's mother expressed her pride in her son in various ways, for having entered a prestigious national university and majoring in the language of her home country. She repeatedly expressed happiness to see her son trying to improve his Vietnamese proficiency. Kai's father occasionally visited Vietnam for business purposes, but he had never made an effort to study the language, even after he married a Vietnamese woman.

Since Kai was a baby, his mother regularly went back to Vietnam with her son, which was her parents' "condition" for approving her marriage with a Japanese man. As Kai's mother spoke mainly Vietnamese while raising her baby, it was very natural for Kai to be able to speak and understand Vietnamese to some degree since he was small. When asked how supportive his father was to Kai's study of Vietnamese, he said that although his father did not directly help him with his study in general, he extended his support by collecting necessary information about the curriculums of different universities and offering suggestions, when he decided to major in Vietnamese at a university.

Unlike Rin, who could often interact with other Vietnamese in the local community, Kai's mother had almost no connection to the other Vietnamese in her neighborhood. Kai's father's mother (his Japanese grandmother) has been living with Kai's family ever since his parents got married, which made it more difficult for Kai's mother to get used to the new life in Japan. Looking back on those days, Kai's mother confessed, "*Tsurakatta* (It was hard)", always missing her home in Vietnam. After Kai was born, she gradually improved her Japanese and gained confidence about living and raising a child in a foreign country.

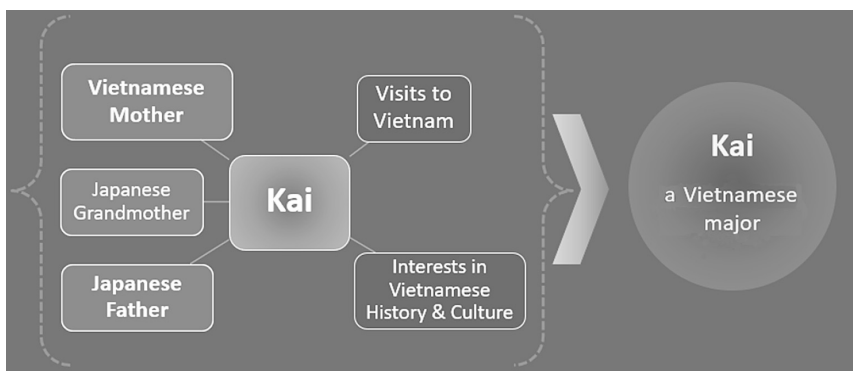
**Table 3**

*Kai's Interactive Context*

Family	Local Community and Parents' Home Country
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vietnamese mother</li><li>• Japanese father</li><li>• Japanese grandmother</li><li>• No siblings or friends with similar HL backgrounds</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Frequent visits to mother's home country</li><li>• No contact with Vietnamese communities in Japan</li></ul>

**Figure 2**

*Motivational Factors for Kai's HL Learning*



### 3) Shin's Interactive Context

Shin's family is different from that of Kai and Rin in the sense that they came to Japan as boat people. Shin admits without hesitation that they were "so poor" when they arrived in Japan. Japan was not necessarily their intended destination, as most boat people in fact had wished to go to the U.S., he said. When choosing a university, Shin had no other choice than a national university for financial reasons.

Although Vietnamese was the dominant language in his family and Shin acquired it as his first language, he lost most of it after he started attending a nursery in Japan, as there was no one around him who spoke the language. When he was in elementary school, his parents got divorced and his mother married another Vietnamese man. Shin's mother indicated in the preliminary survey that she was very happy about her son studying Vietnamese at university. However, as Shin's mother started studying Japanese seriously later, his opportunity to interact with his mother in Vietnamese decreased. At the time of the data collection, Shin was living by himself and did not meet his parents often.

Shin's older sister did not receive any formal instruction in Vietnamese. Still, his mother said, Shin's sister had a better pronunciation than Shin, which made him consider himself unfortunate. His younger brother was a junior high school student and had literally "no interest" in Vietnam and its language. Shin told the researcher he found it interesting that in every immigrant family, the oldest child spoke the HL best and the youngest, the least. It is always the oldest child who mediates between the parents and the children, which was also observed in Rin's family.

One notable characteristic concerning Shin's perception of his linguistic skills was his considering his English fluency higher than his Vietnamese. In the preliminary survey, when the researcher asked him how he compared his competencies in English, Japanese, and Vietnamese, and his answer was somewhat surprising. Shin stated, "If my Japanese is ranked 10, English would be 3 and Vietnamese 1." After entering university, he became more interested in languages in general and studied English especially hard during the four years. In fact, without any experience of visiting English-speaking countries, Shin passed the 1<sup>st</sup> grade of Eiken and achieved 955 in TOEIC when he was a sophomore. When asked if he ever wanted to maintain his Vietnamese proficiency, he said "yes", but he "didn't put it into practice" after all.

Another highlight of Shin's perception of language learning is his sensitivity to the sounds

of each language. He believed that the best way to improve one’s language skills was to develop his listening and speaking. Despite his high English proficiency, Shin considered his listening ability in Vietnamese as undoubtedly higher than that in English. He may not be able to read some Vietnamese words, but he would most likely get the meaning, if someone read them aloud.

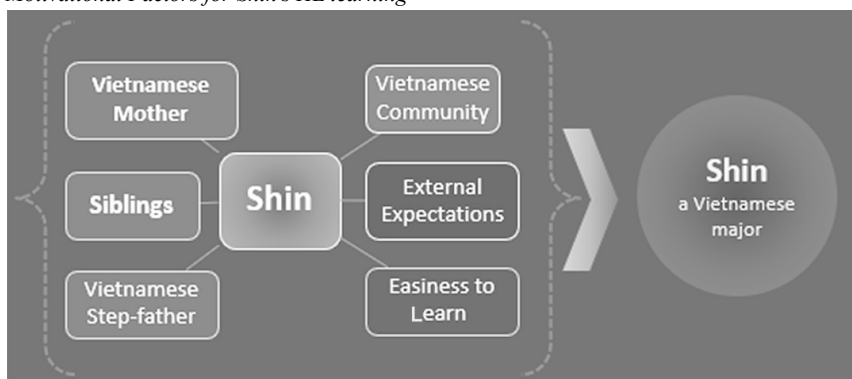
**Table 4.**

*Shin’s Interactive Context*

Family	Local Community and Parents’ Home Country
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vietnamese mother</li> <li>• Vietnamese stepfather</li> <li>• Two siblings: Older sister and younger brother</li> <li>• Low S.E.S (Parents came to Japan as boat people)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rare visits to parents’ home country</li> <li>• Few contacts with Vietnamese communities in Japan</li> </ul>

**Figure 3**

*Motivational Factors for Shin’s HL learning*



## **Emerging Themes**

There were mainly two themes that emerged from the findings. One concerns the participants' family relationships and the other, their affective characteristics.

### 1) Family Relationships

First, with all the participants, the mother appears to play a major role in their HL learning and/or maintenance. All the mothers were pleased that their children were majoring in Vietnamese at a university, thus providing them with strong moral support for their HL learning. Kai's mother, for example, said, "My son's my hope. I'm so happy and proud to see him learn Vietnamese." Similarly, Shin said, "My mother looked so happy that I was going to major in Vietnamese at a university."

Second, unlike the mother's role, that of the fathers' seemed minimal in the participants' HL learning. "My father works for a security company and doesn't come home when he works the night shift," Rin commented implying that her father didn't or rather couldn't be involved in her education, whether it be HL-related or not. Shin also admitted, "He [My father] is not fully aware of what's going on in our family. My father's probably a high school graduate... and knows nothing about schools and universities in Japan."

Third, the grandparents serve as a motivator for the participants to maintain Vietnamese. For example, since Rin's Vietnamese grandparents spoke almost no Japanese, she needed to speak Vietnamese to communicate with them.

Fourth, the siblings also helped create opportunities for the use of HL by the participants. Rin had to mediate the relationship between her twin sisters and mother from time to time, and she felt it a role expected of her by her family members. Shin also observed the relationship between the birth order among siblings and their HL proficiency development.

## 2) Learner Characteristics

Another finding of this study concerns the participants' affective characteristics pertinent to their HL and its learning. For example, at the interview, Rin said, "Honestly, I used to look down on Vietnam, but I came to respect their culture by learning the language." Her attitudes towards Vietnam changed as her interest in the contemporary Vietnamese culture was deepened through her interactions with a Vietnamese cousin. Rin's relationship with her cousin led her to study the Vietnamese language harder, so that she could communicate well with and be closer to the cousin. Further, her sense of responsibility is another affective characteristic that helped her learn and maintain her HL, i.e., as the oldest daughter, she felt she was expected to support her grandparents and mother. Compared to her Japanese classmates, Rin's Vietnamese proficiency is obviously much more advanced. Nevertheless, Rin feels she needs to be careful about her behaviors in front of her Japanese classmates. She once heard a Japanese student speaking negatively of another HL student who has a Thai mother, which made her aware that she could also appear bossy to her Japanese classmates if she showed off her Vietnamese skills.

Kai has a strong interest in world history, and to read books on Vietnamese history, he wanted to improve his reading skills in Vietnamese. At the interview, he mentioned that he had no negative experiences regarding his mixed ethnic background, probably because he does not stand out with his appearance among his Japanese friends. However, because Kai was the only HL learner in the Vietnamese major at his university, he sometimes felt he had to be careful with his behavior, which was also observed in Rin's comments. For example, when he and his classmates were choosing a contestant in a Vietnamese speech contest, no one raised a hand. Then, the teacher suggested that Kai be the contestant because he was a fluent Vietnamese speaker. Although he agreed to be the contestant eventually, he regretted later that there might have been somebody else who wanted to contest, and if so, he might have snatched their chance.

Finally, like Rin, Shin noted that he too felt the responsibility as the oldest son to support



his mother. However, he was also strongly concerned with his career success, which encouraged him to improve his English rather than Vietnamese proficiency. At the same time, Shin held a strong belief about how a foreign language should be taught and how he should study one. He considered the phonetic aspect of a language much more important than others. Shin was aware that his Vietnamese ability did not progress much during the four years at the university, partly because of his lack of adequate effort, but it was also due to the way the class was taught, he argued. Shin usually went by his Vietnamese name and was often mistaken for a “*Gaikokujin*” (=foreigner). He said that whenever people “praised” his Japanese skills, he jokingly answered, “Yes, of course, I studied like hell.”

## **Conclusion**

This study attempted to clarify how HL learners’ family backgrounds and socio-educational characteristics influence their positioning themselves as learners of Vietnamese at a university and how such positioning interacts with the HL learners’ other characteristics in continuing/maintaining their multiple identities. It was found that HL learners of the same target language belong to different backgrounds and are situated in various learning contexts.

One common feature observed across the participants was the significance of family relationships, especially the mother’s role. Another noteworthy point concerns how HL learners develop, change, or negotiate their multiple identities in the course of language learning. As was shown in Rin’s case, her attitude toward Vietnam changed as her ties to Vietnamese relatives became stronger. Kai, being the only HL learner in his major, sometimes had to consider how he was perceived by other classmates. Shin, who maintains his Vietnamese name and nationality, is often not treated as Japanese, although Japanese is his dominant language and his way of thinking is no different from that of other Japanese youth.

The diversity and uniqueness of the HL learners in this study speak of the need for HL

educators in Japan to develop a curriculum sensibly tailored to their needs and challenges with pedagogical considerations. One suggestion is for HL educators to pay careful attention not only to individual learner's in-class performance and behaviors, but also to the broader context outside the classrooms in which they are situated, since it is outside the classroom that HL learners are often engaged in activities associated with the HL in very different ways than most non-HL learners.

### **Future Research**

A longitudinal trace study of the participants would be desirable to observe how Kai and Rin develop their Vietnamese language skills in the following years at the universities and how Shin continues or discontinues learning of Vietnamese after graduating from university.

Lacking in the data for the current study is the perspectives of non-HL (mostly Japanese) students in their Vietnamese classes. At the interviews with the participants, Rin and Kai, in particular, expressed concerns about how they look to their Japanese classmates. They seemed to be very careful not to offend their classmates' feelings by standing out with their advanced Vietnamese skills. Interviews with Japanese students might add insights into how HL learners may position themselves in relation to their Japanese classmates.

Similarly, interviewing their Vietnamese teachers might be significant in that it could provide valuable implications as to how educators could accommodate HL learners' needs and perceptions in their curriculum.

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