

HERITAGE LANGUAGES IN JAPAN

Heritage language learners in Japanese schools. Returnee students. Problems, limitations and one proposal.

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Abstract

Due to the number of international marriages increasing and with the return of expatriated and second or third generation Japanese immigrants from South America, the Japanese education system has not evolved as quickly as the changes happening in society. Schools and teachers are not still prepared enough to take multicultural students in and help them develop and reach a standard academic level in Japanese schools. They also fail to care about their student's heritage language development, identities and emotional health. This paper begins by examining some important concepts related to heritage language, heritage speakers, heritage language learners and returnees. These concepts should be clarified among members of the educational community and educational policy makers. The paper then describes some cases of heritage language in the Japanese context and shows examples of difficulties these students have had in their scholarly life in Japanese schools, because of a lack of awareness about their necessities and the usage of inappropriate methods to guide them into academic life. Finally some ideas about what the role of the school, teachers and community should be are discussed. A proposal of steps to take in order to systematize the educational approach for these children is then outlined. The results of a pilot survey to Spanish teachers at the university level searching their views about the importance of heritage language awareness and education are also discussed.

Keywords: Multilingual and multicultural education awareness in Japan, Heritage language, Heritage speaker, Heritage language learners, Returnee students.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness about what is still needed to be done in Japanese schools and universities, whether public or private, to support students with (a) heritage language(s) regardless of their origin (indigenous, intercultural marriage - Japanese · foreigner -, foreign and returnee) in coping with school social and academic life as well as maintaining their bi or multicultural identity. Who these students are, their needs, and their actual possibilities of academic success once they enter into the Japanese schools will be examined through student testimonies. There are questions to be discussed as to what happens with those students that cannot make it into the educational system; why can't they, and, what are the schools, teachers and society lacking to make it possible.

Considering that it is of vital importance to know the experiences and needs of heritage speakers and heritage language learners in schools and universities and what their teachers think, know and don't know about their situation, interviews were conducted with a group of heritage language learners in the Iberoamerica Department of Kanda University of International Studies. A survey was also distributed to a group of teachers in the Iberoamerican Department in order to collect testimonies about the education at the University for heritage language speakers and their experiences as teachers of heritage language learners. This paper is based on a pilot experimental approach that aims to find effective ways to help new generations of returnee students with heritage languages and to aid heritage language learners in their struggle not to be left behind in education.

2. Defining Heritage Language.

To start a discussion about HL, we have to refer to language acquisition. As Montrul (2016) specifies, “it is the growth of language (and, more specifically, growth of a grammatical and communicative system) in the mind of a speaker”. (p. 1). When children grow up interacting linguistically and socially using two languages (or more), it is a case of languages in contact. (Weinrich, 1974). The heritage languages are minority languages in their own or foreign territory (Montrul, 2016, p.15). So depending on the context and circumstances the case of heritage language will vary. Cases in the Japanese context are the Ainu language, Ryukyuan language groups (non-immigrant minority communities), the Korean, the Chinese, Spanish, English, Brazilian Portuguese and other languages; the returnee students dominant language (if different from Japanese).

Let us examine one specific situation that can occur in Japan. One bilingual child born in Japan, with two mother tongues, Japanese and Spanish, will find that the foreign language (when one of the parents is foreign), Spanish, is his/her heritage language. However, if they move to the “foreign parent’s Spanish speaking country”, then the child’s other language, Japanese, will become the heritage language (if the child attends a local school). But in the case of moving to a third different dominant language speaking country, for example English, if the child goes to school and socializes in the third language for a substantial period of time, this child will have two heritage languages (Japanese and Spanish). Finally, if a child returns to Japan (as a returnee student, depending on the length and amount of exposure of the child to the third language (English)- if the period is long enough that he/she finds it easier and more comfortable to study in it- this third language (English) will become a heritage language too, “ ... because spoken English was part of their cultural and linguistic upbringing while living abroad” (Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2013) in this new contextual situation despite being in Japan. (Cases like this occur among children from families that work,

for example, as Diplomats or International companies). All depends on the context (Montrul: 2018) and the use priority of the language.

There is an abundant bibliography with various definitions of a heritage language. There is a general concept of what “heritage” means. But in most of them there is an agreement in the complexity of defining heritage language. (Montrul: 2016) Each case has to be contextualized. There are many different individual cases of heritage language situations hence they result in differences in the background among heritage speakers that should be taken into account when they enter schools, especially if they are returnee students.

3. Who is a Heritage Speaker?

According to Montrul’s (2016, p.17) own definition of heritage language “...heritage speakers are early bilinguals because they were exposed to the heritage language and the majority language in childhood. However (...) their command of the two languages changes throughout the life course and the language learning period (...)”. She explains that there are different degree of proficiency in different heritage language speakers.

The following are the characteristics of heritage speakers according to Montrul,

-A bilingual individual who grew up in a bilingual home and has linguistic proficiency in two languages.-The first language, or one of the first languages, spoken at home is sociolinguistically minority language (the heritage language).-The bilingual individual is usually dominant in the societal majority language (although balanced-heritage speakers also exist).-The heritage language is often the weaker language.-The degree of proficiency in the heritage language ranges from minimal and receptive ability to fully fluent and native-like.-Proficiency in the social majority language is typically native or native-like (depending on the level of education). (Montrul, 2016. P.18).

Furthermore, depending on the amount of time the children are socially and academically exposed to a different language if living abroad at a certain point in their lives, when returning to their mother country, they will become heritage speakers of that lately acquired language as already mentioned before. At this point it is important to say that heritage speakers are not necessarily heritage language learners and that there should be motivation for preserving or improving their heritage language proficiency. (Montrul, 2016).

For example, in Japan, the Ainu people could be both, heritage speakers and/or heritage language learners. Their case refers to the consequences of the Japanese dominance of their territory and the assimilation policies that has caused their language to become endangered. The returnee students, the children of immigrants or mixed marriages constitute other cases of heritage speakers. It is important to bear in mind that “heritage speakers are born into a particular sociolinguistic and political situation” (Montrul, 2016, p.34).

4. Who are returnee students in Japan? Are they heritage speakers?

Returnee students are ““return-to-the-nation ” boys and girls, students, or people”. (Willis, Onoda and Enloe,, 1994). In Japan the number of Japanese returnees is increasing dramatically (Shimomura, 2014; Willis et all. (1994). A returnee student in Japan would be a child that is born, raised and educated in Japan, but at one stage of his/her school life (primary or secondary school) had to move to a foreign country where he/she coexists with (if studying in a Japanese School) or is educated in a second language that he/she also uses to socially interact. Finally, after a certain period of time living abroad (around two years minimum) they return to Japan and are reenrolled in school or come back just at the right time to take entrance examinations to university as returnee students. .

In Japan there are also cases of children of Japanese nationals that were born and

raised outside Japan (because of their parent's jobs) in different countries and educated in International Schools. And when their parents come back to resettle in Japan, this kids are considered as returnees too.

The problem is that still many schools that receive returnees, are not really aware of the different kind of returnees there are and tend to think they all are English speakers.

The returnee students are heritage speakers of Japanese and could also be heritage language learners. Japanese becomes their heritage language when they are living abroad with no Japanese language instruction.

In the section below I will expand on the idea of returnee students as heritage speakers and heritage language learners.

5. Cases of Heritage Speakers and Heritage Language Learners in Japan.

I would like to attempt to, rather than classify, simply describe some different types of heritage speakers and heritage language learners that I am familiar with in Japan in order to show how complex and varied these cases are. Cases of heritage speakers that enroll in Japanese schools could be as follows:

a. Children from International marriages (Japanese-foreigner). This cases are in the raise and will become more common in the future.

a.1. Born in Japan. If the mother is Japanese, often there are cases that the father's language -the heritage one- is lost or is never learned (in this case the child cannot be considered as heritage language learner. Montrul, 2016) or it is not spoken fluently by the child. If the mother is foreign, the heritage language is mostly spoken with her at

home, though there are cases where the foreign language of the mother is not considered important or the father prohibits the mother to teach her language to the children. Some parents decide that the heritage language is not worth learning. Therefore the child is not a heritage language speaker despite there being a heritage language at home.

a.2. Born outside Japan. These children may speak Japanese with different proficiency levels, then Japanese is their heritage language, but if they are not studying in a Japanese school, they are not heritage language learners. Others may not speak it at all. Those that do not study in Japanese schools abroad, but still speak Japanese, are not academically fluent in Japanese, especially in their reading and writing abilities. They are potential returnees to Japan where they will have problems catching up in school if returning to Japan. They will present not only language problems, but issues relating to cultural adaptability. They will find schools are not equipped with the assistance they need to actively participate and progress in the school (if parents cannot afford an international school in Japan). Even those that go to Japanese schools may also experience varying degrees of difficulties when they enter to schools in Japan.

b. The children of immigrants that have created communities in Japan as the Chinese, Koreans or Nikkei - descendants of Japanese immigrants that live in communities around the world and the ones that return to Japan (Shintani, 2014)- from Brazil, Argentine, Peru among other countries. All of them are subject to changing immigration policies according to generation. (Shintani, 2014)

c. Returnee children.

c.1. Children born and raised in Japan (one or both parents are Japanese). They were born and educated in Japan during the primary or secondary school and went to live

to a foreign country (where Japanese becomes the heritage language). They live as expats abroad for several years or travel to different countries and receive education in English or/and other languages. When their families are repatriated to Japan they have to enroll at a Japanese school. The language they have been learning and socializing with during the years up to that point will become a heritage language for them. As is mistakenly assumed by many educators and educational institutions in Japan, the language they were studying abroad is not necessarily English. They may not know how to communicate in even basic English. Many of them find out that the teachers and people in charge of education are not well informed about the different cases of kikokushijo (returnees) there are and as a consequence schools are not prepared to include and support them, as pointed out by Clavel (2014), the Ministry of Education Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has given funding and promotion to special programs for returnees, but does not make policies that directly relate to the returnee students. Cases of returnee students that enroll in Japanese schools could be as follows:

c.1.1. Returnee children that are already fluent in Japanese and received their education abroad in English (International schools or local schools). They are enthusiastically integrated in private schools in Japan that are willing to accept returnee children that speak both Japanese and English fluently and thus will give higher status to their school.

c.1.2. Returnee students that received education abroad only in English and are not fluent speakers of Japanese because they were raised abroad. They find it difficult to enroll in Japanese private schools because of their low level of Japanese. They are unlikely to succeed in the entrance examinations. They are generally forced to enroll in local schools or some private schools where the entrance examination is available in

English. However, once having entered the school, they will receive education only in Japanese, which is very hard without the appropriate guidance and emotional support.

c.1.3. Returnee children that received education abroad but in a language other than English. As many of them cannot speak in English, they find it very difficult to be accepted in a private school that are mostly willing to integrate those students that are fluent in English as well as in Japanese. They have to enroll in local public schools where the education is only in Japanese. If their school is in an area with substantial foreign communities, they may find help even in their mother tongues. If not, they may end up dropping out of school or suffer from serious depression and loss of motivation. They realize the teachers are not trained in dealing with and teaching kikokushijo (returnees). Many of them also suffer from harassment.(Shimomura, 2014) They are also at a high risk of losing the language(s) they have learned during the years that they lived abroad.

c.1.4. Returnee students that come back to Japan but have received education in Japanese schools abroad. Even these students have troubles readjusting to Japanese schooling and society despite having lived in pseudo-Japanese communities.

d. Indigenous peoples of Japan such as Ainu and Ryukyu. They have a different situation. Their parents have suffered discrimination and their language and culture is widely unknown by their own co-nationals. These are the languages that should not be heritage languages in Japan, but languages of Japan. They are called heritage languages because they were forced into disuse with assimilation policies that targeted the language, culture and identity of the Ainu and Ryukyu. Now they represent a minority whose heritage is on the brink of extinction.

6. An overview of problems suffered by Spanish heritage language students and returnee students in either public or private schools in Japan. Some testimonies.

This is a group where you can find children with parents of foreign origin only (from Spanish speaking countries), both parents born abroad with Japanese ancestors, one parent Japanese and the other either a foreigner (international marriage) or born abroad with Japanese ancestors, among other cases. Some of these children may not speak Spanish at all, but are accustomed to listening to it. Some of them can speak it but not fluently, with a limited vocabulary and no grammatical knowledge. Others can speak Spanish very well but have limited grammatical knowledge. And the returnee students that are back from Spanish speaking countries also belong to this group.

6.1 Bullied at school. A testimony.

One of my students with Peruvian and Japanese roots could speak Spanish at home, but once she entered the primary school where there were not children like her, having being bullied for her “non-traditional Japanese” physical appearance, manners, language and so forth, consciously decided, in agreement with her twin brother, not to speak Spanish anymore. Whenever their mother spoke Spanish to them, they answered in Japanese. Years later she decided to study and specialize in Spanish at university in order to recover her linguistic and cultural roots, and now she is regretting her childhood decision because she is finding difficult something that was natural for her as a child: speaking Spanish. Nowadays she wishes to be able to get to know her mother better speaking Spanish with her.

Some parents decide to send their children to study abroad so they will not suffer from being abused for the sake of being “different”.

6.2. Heritage language speaker and learner testimony. About language assistance in her primary school.

She is a university student. She is of Peruvian origin (mother and father from Peru) and reports that in her school there were many immigrant children. She is an immigrant herself (when she was five years old her parents moved to Japan), but her sisters were born in Japan. At home the spoken language is Spanish. Her mother could not speak Japanese so she used to work as an interpreter between her mother and her teachers. At the school there was a Nikkei staff member who was in charge of translating the “letters for parents” into Spanish. But that staff member’s Spanish level was very limited and the parents could not understand what was written in the letters even though they were in Spanish. My student had to translate them for her mother. That situation helped her to master Japanese faster than her sisters. Her sisters had many problems reading and writing in Japanese. Reading comprehension homework was a nightmare for them. Fortunately there were volunteers to help them in the school, but those volunteers did not know exactly how to solve the problem. Then my student had to help her sisters and realized that they were writing Japanese using Spanish grammar order. She helped them by teaching them how they could write in Japanese what they were thinking in Spanish. My student could realize what the problem was because she went through that experience before. This story gives us important information. Even though there was thoughtful help and care coming from the school and community to the families and children, that help was not at the level of the needs of the students. The letters translated into Spanish was a great idea but not an effective aid since the Spanish of the translator could not be understood. Sufficient language proficiency among the people in charge of attending to the foreign students should be carefully checked. Also, the volunteers that help the returnee students should at least receive some training on how to effectively help the children and should work shoulder to shoulder with the homeroom teacher. This has to

be a team effort.

6.3. The lack of gradual and systematic academic (re)insertion, emotional care and monitoring.

When a returnee child is being reinserted -heritage language reversal (Benmamoun et al. 2013))- or a foreign student is entering the Japanese system of education for the first time, this process should be undertaken gradually. Every case has to be analyzed and should be given the appropriate attention and care in schools as well as monitoring the goals achieved by the kids. Schools should also think about preserving the heritage language of their students, or at least provide information about places where the heritage language children and parents could go to find information about heritage language support activities in their neighborhoods or in their Prefecture.

There are cases (it has to be determined how often this is happening in Japanese schools) that returnee children or children that enter the Japanese system of education for the first time, enroll in junior high schools that despite claiming to welcome returnee children or foreign children, are in reality giving education completely in Japanese. They do not have the infrastructure for a returnee frame of education. Returnee students with very little knowledge of Japanese have to try to concentrate on understanding all the academic education and instructions during the class time for five days with no teacher confirming if they are understanding the lesson or the instructions or copying the homework correctly, from the blackboard and in kanji. Children go back home tired and frustrated. There is no teacher to explain something in English or a language the returnee or foreign student can understand and there is no information about the school routine for foreign parents. They underestimate the deepness of the problems they are causing the children and their families.

6.3.1. Lack of emotional care in schools and community.

No counselling staff are available to help and support either the students or their parents during the process of adaptation. Even if there is such a staff member available who is willing to help, as they usually don't speak English (or other languages) or cannot count on having an interpreter with them, they are likely to be unable to effectively carry out these tasks.

6.3.2. A wrong practice with tests and evaluations. Becoming “handicapped”. No academic future for some returnee students.

The tests are conducted in Japanese language so the returnee or the heritage language student do not understand the questions and they cannot answer them. As Cummins (2000) point out for students that enter high schools with limited knowledge of English in USA, “... they were being assessed with the same tests as Native English speaking students. Consequently many were failing courses or receiving grades that would preclude them from going on to university or college” They have to try to study from the books that they cannot read. The teachers are not evaluating the knowledge of the subject but their Japanese language ability. The students get low grades and they are always in the bottom of the grades-list when the grades are published for everyone to see them. They are devastated. This situation may continue for years. Their grades are low to the point they find it hard to meet with the requirements to enter high schools and universities. This is ruining their academic future as well as their self-confidence in general. These schools indicate a narrow understanding of returnee students' needs. This is hard to accept for both the children and their families.

Additionally, there are cases where school classmates think that the foreign or returnee child lacks intelligence because (s)he cannot read Japanese well, cannot participate in class, or answer the teachers questions in the class. One case close to me

is a boy who could not speak Japanese when he entered the third grade in Japanese primary school. He could never participate in class. When he was in the fifth grade, he could finally understand and feel confident to answer a question by the teacher. He was so happy to be finally able to do so, but then a classmate told him: “You have finally become intelligent!”- Clouding his happiness. This same boy, spent the whole third grade and part of the fourth without a “dogubako” (a box that works as a chest of drawers in the desk) because no teacher informed neither the mother nor him (or he didn’t understand) that he had to buy one. The teacher did not even realize about it. One day during a class observation for students’ parents (yugyosankan) one parent asked the boy’s mother why her son didn’t have one, and the boy’s mother was surprised because she did not know what the other parent was talking about.

Other cases that I have been informed about in junior and senior high is teachers telling returnee students to ask them what they don’t understand. But the main problem is that they are missing so much information due to their lack of proficiency in Japanese that they, themselves, do not know which data is missing or what information they have not understood. Then, they do not know what to ask and the teachers think the students have understood everything, until they get low grades in the exams and the teachers wonder why. We can observe that important information (academic or from any other field) is taken for granted by teachers that are not aware that information that is obvious for Japanese students and parents is not so for foreign students and their parents.

6.3.3. The thought that Academic language requirement and the social language requirements are the same skills.

Many private schools are eager to call themselves “global schools”. They have student exchange programs along with extensive advertising featuring pictures of their returnee or foreign students, but in fact, one could argue that they do little for them and

don't know how to develop their skills in Japanese and other subjects. They do not seem to understand the differences between academic language requirements for the classroom and the social language used to socialize. I have been told by several teachers that young children are like sponges with the language. But while this statement could be true for their social life in the playground, the reality is otherwise at the academic level in the classroom. Second language acquisition in the context of first language classroom must be guided. These children need specialized academic instruction.

6.4. The life style at home.

It may affect the possibility of maintaining the heritage language, especially if both parents, or even just the one that speaks the foreign language, are working. (Shintani, 2014)".

6.5. Shortage of communication between the school, the teachers, the parents and the students.

Foreign parents complain that they are not usually considered by teachers in schools. A non-Japanese speaker parent, or those that can speak the language but cannot read it, are not able to read the letters that the school sends with important information about activities or things the students have to take to school. For example, a foreign parent that is not instructed on how to read the school timetable. Therefore, (s)he doesn't know when children have no school or the special days when they need *obento* (a packed lunch box). This might mean that the child finishes school early one day, arrives home but the parent is not there because nobody at home knew about the school scheduling. Another case could be that the school class has a day-long school trip and the child is the only one without *obento*. This affects the child making him feel sad and left out. Parents also don't know about the homework and other similar things, so they have no tools to keep an eye

on their children's studies.

The students do not know, especially during the first year what to inform to their parents. Maybe they did not understand it themselves. Therefore, parents become “disconnected” too. It means that there should be a network of foreign parents in school to help each other or call for volunteers to guide the parents and arrange meetings between the homeroom teachers and the parents.

7. Approaches to the “should be” role of schools, teachers and society.

Local public schools (genchiko no gakkō). If the school is located in one area where there are settlements of different foreign nationalities, they often offer help in foreign languages to the children and parents. Parents can also find other foreign parents to help. But the majority of schools do not have large numbers of this type of student. Most of the time they have none at all. But it should be stressed that even if there is only one student in this situation, this is enough reason for the school to take care of that child, which does not often happens successfully.

If one school never has this type of student and suddenly one day one or more enroll, they should count with the necessary resources in order to be prepared for that event. The common argument that “only for one student” nothing can be done, ruining their future forever should be eradicated. As Cummins points out “... schools should address the needs of all students.” (Cummins, 2000). There should be several channels to provide information about school life, the materials to buy, etc. in a comprehensible language for parents. There should be meetings between the school, the language support volunteers and the family prior to the first day of class and during the school year, apart from the regular “mendan”(parent-teacher meeting). Parents should be explained things that are not familiar for families that come from abroad. Information as simple as buying

“dogubako”(chest of drawos), is important to be given. If not, foreign parents will never guess this is necessary and their child will be the only one without one until somebody realizes (s)he doesn't have it. It is therefore important to create a network of foreign parents with kids in the school. They can be of great support for new comer parents at the beginning. The worst thing is to isolate the new parents, especially when they cannot yet speak Japanese well (or at all). Awareness of this problem should be raised in schools to teachers as well as PTA members and all other parents and classmates.

Private schools. The variegated circumstances of returnee children should be analyzed. There should be several entrance examinations that are determined by children's surrounding circumstances, their Japanese language proficiency as well as their English language level or other foreign language knowledge. This would be necessary in order to determine what kind of help they need to get started in schools at the academic level they belong.

The private schools should avoid using their returnee or foreign students purely as advertising for the school as well as promoting it as a “global school”. People rely on this information, but the reality is that many of those schools are not especially interested in the fate of returnee or foreign students with heritage language or other difficulties. They want to show local parents that their children will learn English in the school and can practice with the returnee students. This is because a large number of schools are not clear on what a returnee student is. They do not take into account their background. It seems that many schools only want those returnee students with high fluency level in both, Japanese and English (that is understandable in itself), but this requirement is not specified when returnee families are looking for schools in Japan and the requirements to do the entrance examination for those schools. They spend money and time preparing their children, and then they find out that they failed the entrance examination because their Japanese ability was not sufficient and the schools lack a way to help them develop

their Japanese language skills. Also, if your child is a returnee who does not speak English, his/her only hope is to enter to a local public school. In this environment there is no way to help children maintain and learn more about their heritage language (s).

Teachers are crucial in the process. Building an understanding of Japanese starts inside that classroom. It is the duty of the teacher to create a welcoming environment among the children, to awaken interest in the new student, his/her language (s) and original culture (s). As Cummins (2000) points out quoting Nieto (1999, p.167) “The inescapable truth... is that teacher’s attitudes and behaviors can make an astonishing difference in students learning”

Good communication among the teachers, the language support volunteers, the new student and parents is very important. If the student cannot speak Japanese yet, the first exams should be conducted in his/her native language. If not, the teacher will only be evaluating their Japanese language level (which is irresponsible), but not the contents of the subject that is what really matters. This may also affect the knowledge and grades average for the students in High School, severely affecting their choices to enter university inside and outside Japan because of low grades stemming from an unfair situation, as mentioned before. At the same time graded Japanese lessons should be provided for them, so they can healthily integrate to their classroom. The heritage language should always be supported by schools. This would be a good example for regular students that could find motivation in learning languages and respecting other languages and cultures. It would also teach the “local” parents how to deal with these problems if one day they need to move abroad and Japanese becomes the heritage language of their own children.

School teachers should be trained on how to deal and teach lessons with this children as a part of the class. How to deal with a class of only Japanese regular students, how to deal with a class of only foreign students and how to deal with a mixed class of regular

Japanese students, returnees students and foreigner students is different. Teachers should be prepared to confront any different “theatre of operations”. In an interview with one teacher from a Japanese private school that receives returnee children he told me that he was very worried about some of his students who were returnees. He could see how much they were struggling to catch up with the lessons and how the school was not being able to cope with their needs. He was unable to help them because he had no ideas or training on how to effectively support them. It is interesting to point out his sincere interest and commitment to his returnee students.

Other teachers I talked to in a public Japanese primary school told me that they would like to help those students, but they did not know how to do it, they don’t speak English (They never stated “foreign language”. Still for many people in Japan, foreign is synonymous with “English”). They added that they cannot make decisions on their own to help them in the classroom and other said that doing something special for them would mean that they had to do something special too for the other regular kids with other kind of problems. Summarizing, schoolteachers need training and maybe many of them are willing to know how to deal with foreign/returnee heritage language students.

8. The role of the University

8.1. Training the university student’s with specialty in foreign languages studies on how to help returnee and heritage language students in the schools.

Taking for example a university like Kanda University of International Studies, where there is a large population of Japanese regular students learning and specializing in foreign languages, constantly exchanging with foreign students, and traveling to foreign countries. They are struggling to understand and make themselves understood in a foreign language. They are learning the importance of a healthy relationship between their own mother language and identity in this process of being in touch with other

languages and cultures. This is especially important when you become an immigrant, when you start the process of integration and you decide your own limits in the process of culture immersion.

There is other group of university students that were returnees themselves and could successfully cope with the Japanese language requirements to finish school and enter universities in Japan. There are Heritage language learners too. These groups could be an important key to the solution of the lack of volunteers to provide language support in schools.

The schools receive volunteers that speak foreign languages to help the newcomer students, but only for few months. They do not have any training as teachers. There are prefectures where there are not enough volunteers so when they have to help the new students that arrive, they leave their former students by themselves again without support “in the middle of the bridge”.

The university students that are majoring in foreign language (or other majors - because school students need also help in maths’ and so forth- that have high proficiency of a foreign language) could be ideal candidates to help the children coming from abroad to the primary or secondary schools (within the surrounding area where they go to university), whether they are returnees or foreigners. Let us take for example Spanish language students or heritage language learners. A representative group of university students from the third year should already have enough Spanish proficiency level to be able to communicate with returnee students, in order to be able to become a “bridge” between the school teachers and the parents. Often, one of the parents (sometimes both of them) cannot speak Japanese and they are isolated from the educational process of their own children which is a problem for everyone, as has been previously established.

Some of the university students have already traveled abroad or have experienced being ryugakusei (foreign exchange students) themselves, struggling with a language and

a new culture abroad, and also trying to follow lessons in the foreign language. They have had similar feelings and experiences to returnees and foreign children coming to Japan to study.

The work of the volunteer student could be of crucial importance for helping heritage language children to sustain confidence in his/her mother tongue or heritage language. (S)he will realize that even though it is important to learn Japanese, his/her language is so important that even the volunteer has studied it too. The volunteer student may be able to better understand the language learning difficulties that the returnee or foreign student have. Therefore their help will be very efficient.

8.2. Training the teachers on how to deal with mix classes.

The university should take a leading role in capacitating their own teachers on how to deal with mixed classes where heritage language learners, regular Japanese and foreign students are studying together. The students that wish to do so could not only be trained by the teachers, but have also experienced themselves this kind of teaching in their own skin in their own class-rooms. This will result in a great experience for the students.

The university could also offer training lessons to school teachers (primary and secondary school) that are already teaching mixed classes and have not had the opportunity to be trained. With this idea a pilot program (with a proper and constant follow up) in pilot areas could be carried out to determine the best way to train university teachers, volunteer university students and school teachers -that are already out in the field and have no training at all but have some experience based on trial and error.

8.3. Pilot survey to a reduced group of Spanish language teachers, both Japanese and native.

The questions made in the survey were orientated to explore the positions of the

Spanish teachers about the teaching methods for heritage learners in mixed class. Some of them had never heard before about heritage languages. But after reading a definition facilitated in the survey, they all agreed that the number of heritage learners is quickly increasing in Japanese schools. They also acknowledged that the number of Spanish heritage learners in their classes at university is low. One teacher answered he could not recognize them in the class. The answer to the question about heritage language learner's attitude in class was that heritage language learners are not bored at lessons with second language learners because they are weak in grammar. Some students try to look for the new information by themselves, but other students simply do not pay attention in their first year. Some teachers think that it is not necessary to do different activities in class for heritage learners. Another group, a smaller one, said they would like to do it sometimes, but they wouldn't know how. Other teachers think that it would be very difficult to bring something different for them when the other students don't have a high enough level to do the activity. They also believed that if the heritage learners want more information they can look for it privately. The class is not a private lesson that could be tailored for them. However, if teachers know how to deal with heritage learners, they could take an assistant role that may provide help for the teacher and the regular students. It is clear, however, that heritage learners benefit from the other students especially in grammar.

Most teachers answered that if they were offered a course to be trained on how to teach Spanish to heritage learners and how to deal with mix classes (with heritage language learners, beginners and advanced) they would take it because it is very important. Other teacher answered that they were not interested in this or because of their age they were already about to retire.

To the question if they considered important that the universities that prepare students to become language teachers should also train them to help returnee and foreign

children engage successfully in the schools in Japan, the answer was positive. Only one teacher stated that it was not relevant.

8.4. Interview to a small group of Spanish heritage language learners from the University.

I have interviewed a small group of Spanish heritage language learners from the university, in order to find out information about their difficulties in their social and academic world. Each case, each story was different. Though all of them are Spanish heritage language learners, the Spanish they are accustomed to speak is different because their families are from different Spanish speaking countries. The circumstances surrounding why their parents came to Japan are very diverse. These students are descendants of Japanese immigrants in Peru, Argentina or Mexico. Their parents are returnee Nikkei. Some were born in Japan whereas others were born overseas or are children of international marriages: Cuban-Japanese, Venezuelan-Japanese, Peruvian-Japanese, and Mexican-Japanese). One student is only Peruvian. This variety of situations makes every case unique. But there was one point of commonality among them; they or their siblings did not find an adequate environment in which to love and maintain their heritage language. It was very inspiring to listen to them saying that they would love to volunteer to help returnee and foreign children settle into schools if they had the opportunity and know how to do so.

8.5. Japanese students volunteering to teach Japanese to foreigners.

One of my students of the Spanish department (Spanish as a second language), belonged to a group of volunteers of Kanda University of International Studies 「くいす にほんご くらぶ」 (The Japanese KUIS Club) (Okuda: 2012) that started helping foreign children in schools. When she started volunteering in the group they were not

helping at the school any more. She began working only with adults, teaching them Japanese and helping parents to read the letters that their children had received from school. She does not have Spanish speaking students, but she says that she would love to volunteer if such an opportunity arose. She also said that she would be very glad to receive training on how to help returnee/ heritage learners.

In a conversation with professor Okuda, one of the founders of the group, she explained that at the beginning they had a teacher from the primary school that would coordinate the encounters between the children and the volunteers from the university, but unfortunately that teacher was relocated to a different school. After that it was difficult to continue the activities in the school and they had to do it in a different place. Therefore, school students usually don't go there, thus essentially limiting it to adults. This situation makes us think that the support should be centralized and non-dependable on teachers that change school every certain time.

9. PROPOSAL.

The proposal would be to start a pilot project, taking into account the problems that groups like the one started by professor Okuda has experienced. The pilot project would be to start training for heritage language teachers at one university. This training would be on how to successfully teach mixed classes with heritage language, second language beginners and advanced levels. This would include opening courses with credits to training students on how to help returnee and foreign students at school to integrate successfully in the Japanese system of education. It is very important to offer training courses for school teachers from primary and secondary levels, both public and private to give them tools on how to successfully integrate returnee and foreign students with heritage language into their school. This would involve giving them appropriate teaching guidance on improving the Japanese language proficiency and skills of returnee-heritage

language students in the other subjects at the same time that they are encouraged to keep their heritage language and identity. The language support volunteers should be trained too. A network for parents should also be created in order to keep them updated about school activities and ways to support their children. Another idea would be to use class hours like Kokusai Rikai Kyoiku (Education for International Understanding) to create language and cultural awareness among the students of the school.

10. Conclusions

By listening to the stories of returnee or foreign students enrolled in Japanese (no international schools), private or public schools, you can immediately realize that there is still a long way to go for the Japanese system of education in terms of allowing these children to successfully learn Japanese and the school subjects in Japanese while at the same time keeping their heritage language and identity.

The history of a successful education system in Japan aiming to embrace the linguistic and cultural needs of its own indigenous peoples, Ainu and Ryukyu, its communities of already settled foreigners of Koreans, Chinese, the relatively new ones of Nikkei immigrants especially from South America and the returnee and standard foreign students is still in the inkwell. It seems that a categorical decision to make the boundaries more flexible in education and establish a system that accepts the challenge to do a specialized education that allows these students to grow not only academically but emotionally should be imminent.

Once Japan visualizes itself as a pluricultural nation, fostering multicultural education will be appreciated and compulsory. Isolated efforts cannot survive long. There should be a centralized system for dealing with these cases when they occur in schools. There should be a new branch of education embracing all the issues concerning the needs of the type of students mentioned above. It should be a collaborative endeavor involving

specialists in language acquisition experienced in education in this area, both Japanese and foreigners, heritage language families along with returnees' students' families. Where every factor is taken into account, every problem is told, analyzed and solved.

If actions are not taken soon, this problem will become within the reach of the hands of the education policymaker, schools, and society. It is better to start with rather small groups. We could compare with other countries like The United States of America with the large immigration of Spanish speaking students. They have already walked down this road. Japan could learn from them bringing teachers specialized in these issues to train teachers in Japan. Training teachers at all school levels, as well as multilingual university students and the volunteer language support teachers is a key step in building a solid base to start.

With the human resources that already exist in Japan, with good will, awareness about the situation, and documentation of the cases, it would be possible to give the opportunity for Japanese students to benefit from contact with a range of diverse languages and work in a collaborative and supportive way. Heritage language learners should be given the opportunity to keep their roots and integrate into schools and be able to choose the path they would like to follow whether if it is going to high school, university or directly into work.

Other children have seen their future negatively affected by low grades that prevent them from entering university or limit their life choices both in Japan and in a foreign country. Others cannot even find a high school to study in nor dream about moving on to higher education. Education is not supposed to ruin people's lives, but rather improve them.

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