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## Acculturation of Japanese Second Language Learners

### **Introduction**

During our time in this Language and Culture class, a topic that has fascinated both of us has been Acculturation and how human beings are socialized into their cultural environment; because both of us are Japanese second language learners, we decided it would be an interesting study Japanese second language learners being socialized in Japanese-Speaking communities, like classes. With this in mind, we began our research with the primary question of “How are Japanese Second Language learners socialized into proper Japanese language usage within Japanese Speaking communities and the Japanese classroom?” and attempted to answer this question through ethnographic research.

### **Fieldwork, Methods, and Ethical Issues**

Our real-time fieldwork primarily took place on Clemson campus during Clemson Japanese 2010 and Japanese 3050 classes. During these classes, we observed the mannerisms of students and logged conversations and interactions to answer the question we set forth at the beginning of our study. To further our data, so as to not have it reduced to just the Japanese 2010 and Japanese 3050 classes, we created a survey that was composed of ten questions and distributed it to students in various Japanese classes ranging from beginner Japanese (Japanese 1010) to Advanced Japanese (Japanese 4060). The participants were left anonymous to allow them to express themselves freely without any shame of selecting lower ratings compared to their peers. Participants of the survey were also informed prior to the survey what the goals and objectives of the survey were. In addition, some ethical issues that could be present in our

research methods included maintaining the anonymity of the survey. We did not want to have our participants' anonymity as if names were disclosed and a participant happened to select the lowest number; we did not want the said participant to feel ashamed for their lack of confidence in a certain area. For ethical concerns pertaining to our observational research, we had to abide by the privacy and well-being of the participants being observed.

### **Japanese Language Learner Survey**

To start off the survey, we wanted to see if there was any correlation between a participant's Japanese confidence level and their understanding of Japanese culture as a whole, so we asked the following two questions:

1. "How confident do you feel with your Japanese?"
2. "How well do you feel you understand Japanese culture as a whole?"

For both questions, the participants could select their confidence and improvement level on a scale of one to five, with one being no confidence and no understanding and five being high confidence and a great understanding. On average, participants ranked their confidence level for Japanese and their understanding of Japanese culture as a whole as a three out of five, with around 63% of participants selecting a three for confidence and around 56.3% selecting a three for understanding. These numbers were interesting because most participants' confidence levels aligned with their Japanese cultural understanding.

Next, we wished to see if there was a relationship between the most challenging and most helpful aspect to acquire within the language. With that in mind, the next set of questions that we asked our participants were:

3. "What areas do you believe are the most challenging to acquire?"

4. “Out of listening, grammar, speaking, reading, and writing, what do you think helps the most in acquiring a language and why?”

For question 3, Participants were given the option to choose between listening, grammar, reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary, and “other,” where they would then have to specify what they believed to be the most challenging and helpful. Many participants found that speaking and listening were the most challenging to acquire, with 50% and 69%, respectively. When we asked why they chose their response in question 4, many participants who selected listening explained that listening displayed language comprehension and that it would be rather challenging to use a language without being able to listen and comprehend it. Of those who selected speaking, those participants stated that it allows them to use and recall grammar points right then and there. Speaking allows them to not only communicate with native speakers but it helps them improve in areas that the other categories cannot. Those who selected grammar and reading had similar answers; they mentioned that grammar and reading allow them to dissect the language truly. They say that it is not like listening, where they can get away with understanding the gist of what is being said. With reading and grammar, not comprehending a few words may throw off the sentence’s overall meaning.

We also believed that it was important to understand how often the participants were actively trying to socialize into the Japanese language community. In addition, we wanted to understand when they were communicating with those in the Japanese language community, if they felt their manners change, so we asked the following questions:

5. How often do you speak to people in Japanese?
6. Do you feel as if your mannerisms change when speaking in Japanese? If yes, how so?

For question 5, the participants were able to respond with a number between one and five with one being that the participant never speaks to others in Japanese outside of class, and 5 being that the participant speaks with others in Japanese on a regular basis. Based on the feedback to the survey we found that the majority of our participants did not often interact with others in Japanese, with 43.8% of those surveyed selecting a two on a one to five scale. We found this to be notable because those that selected a higher confidence level spoke Japanese more frequently. For question 6, almost all the participants responded that they felt their mannerisms change when speaking Japanese. Some participants stated that they would incorporate what they considered Japanese polite culture, like speaking softer, and they also stated that their speech would become more contextual. The participants' speech becoming more contextual is interesting as Japanese often drops the topic of a sentence when the speaker assumes it is known what is being talked about, and shows a change in mental state when speaking the language similar to linguistic relativity.

In addition to multiple select and multiple choice questions in the survey, we also included an open-ended question. We asked participants if they believed it was necessary to understand Japanese culture to understand the language. Of those who participated in the survey, everyone said yes. They insist that without understanding the culture, they would be unable to fully represent and express themselves to a Japanese person— especially if the culture has not been utilized to its full potential. Another participant commented that even if one speaks the language fluently but does not understand or know Japanese culture or customs, they could potentially commit a cultural taboo. It would then make making friends, creating business relationships, and connecting with the Japanese community would be much more challenging.

From the survey data we collected, we saw that participants felt that if Japanese culture is

understood, they can understand how and why certain things—such as form, grammar points, and writings—are the way they are in that language. Knowing the culture helps learners understand the meanings more. When a person writes kanji and sees specific radicals, the student can infer a general gist of what a kanji may mean from the radical alone. For example, the kanji ‘言’ (iu) means to say. The bottom radical, ‘口’ or ‘kuchi,’ is mouth. When a person sees the 口 radical for 言, they can conclude that 言 may have to do with the mouth, which it does, given that you have to use your mouth to speak verbally. Participants found that the more they understood Japanese culture, the easier they found it was easier to understand Japanese people’s feelings and mindset. Additionally, they found it much easier to participate in a Japanese social setting the more they understood their culture.

### **Observations of Japanese Language Classes**

Our real-time observations took place in Japanese 2010 and Japanese 3050. During our observations in Japanese 2010, we found the students to exhibit many mannerism-based changes depending on the context in class, with mannerisms changing based on whether they were inside the classroom, outside the classroom, or talking to peers before and after class. Outside the classroom and before class began, when the students were to greet their classmates, we found that they tended to greet each other in an American style by waving hello. In contrast, however, when the class had begun, or the students were already inside the classroom when the class had begun, students would greet each other, in a Japanese style, with a bow. A similar scenario also occurred when students would leave the classroom, with many bowing as a “thank you for the lesson” gesture. In addition, we also observed that prior to learning proper gift-giving in the Japanese class, students would return their short kanji and vocabulary quizzes with one hand. However, upon learning the proper Japanese way of returning papers with two hands and

observing the Professor also collecting papers with two hands, the students began to change their mannerisms to the Japanese style of etiquette they had observed from their Professor.

During real-time observations in Japanese 3050, we also found similar mannerism-based changes with students handing in quizzes and homework assignments with the Japanese style way of giving rather than the American style; however, the students did not need to be prompted or shown to demonstrate this mannerism and instead were just expected. We determined this to be a successful socialization of students due to the modeling done by Professors in earlier classes since students in this class had been studying Japanese for at least four semesters. During our observations in Japanese 3050, we also found that the Professor would use modeling to socialize students into proper language usage. An example interaction between the Japanese 3050 Professor and one of the students when talking about Mt. Fuji was as follows:

**Professor:** jaa minnasan, nihon ni iku toki ni fujisan ni noboritaidesuka?

(Then everyone, when you go to Japan, do you want to climb Mt. Fuji?)

**Student:** Hai, fujisan wo noboritai! (Yes, I want to climb the Mt. Fuji!)

**Professor:** fujisan ni noboritai? (You want to climb Mt. Fuji?)

**Student:** fujisan ni noboritaidesu. (I want to climb Mt. Fuji)

In the conversation above, the Professor would use modeling and mimicking to demonstrate the correct way for the student to express one's meaning. Rather than simply stating that the student was wrong, the Professor repeated the students' statements with correct Japanese particle usage. Providing students with the desired language outcome without explicitly stating the student was wrong allowed them to learn on their own. This simple technique demonstrated another way of socializing students through interaction with proper language usage into Japanese-speaking communities. However, an additional observation we found interesting was the Professors' use of the Japanese short form, the more casual form of speech in Japanese.

Japanese short form is a conjugation that can be applied to verbs and is often used with others that the speaker deems "in the group." For example, in the above conversation, the Professor uses the verb "noboritai" rather than saying "noboritaidesu" to make it more formal. In a traditional Japanese classroom, teachers typically place themselves in a position higher than students in order to create effective learning. However, in the Japanese 3050 class, the Professor often presented himself as an equal to their students by using the short form, and we found this extremely interesting. In order to figure out why this is the case, we used John Schumann's Acculturation Model. The explanation we came up with to explain why the Professor would often decide to lower himself rather than raise himself above their students with their language use was that it was to make the language itself less intimidating, as according to John Schumann's Acculturation Model, Social Dominance patterns, learners that view their reference group as superior are less likely to learn the language. Therefore, if the students in the Japanese 3050 class view the Japanese speakers as equals, it will make the Japanese language, and by association, the Japanese-speaking community as a whole, more approachable and encourage more Japanese language usage and interaction with Japanese social customs. This explains why about half the time, the Professor would make statements like "fujisan ni noboritai?" and use the short form to foster an environment that feels more interpersonal and is easier to be socialized into Japanese-speaking communities.

Another observation we made during Japanese 3050 classes was that classmates with different Japanese levels would assist their fellow students during lessons, before and after class. The content that the students would assist with would often include Kanji and Grammar, but the students would also practice speaking by engaging in small talk and banter in Japanese and English. For example, one such interaction where three students were discussing their Japanese

presentation topics is as follows:

**Student 1:** (Student 3) san, hapyou no topiku nani? (Student 3, What's your topic for the project?)

**Student 2:** I'm doing video games cause it gives me an excuse to look up video game stuff.  
(chuckles)

**Student 1:** kusa wo sawate! (laughs) (Go touch grass!)

**Student 3:** eh? "kusa wo sawate" te nani? (Huh? What's "Go touch grass"?)

**Student 2:** It means "touch grass". I think that it's just an English internet thing. It means you should go outside and stop playing video games.

**Student 3:** Ah! wakata. zenzen sono hyougen kiita koto ga nai. (Oh! I get it, I've never heard that expression before.)

**Student 1:** zehi eigodeshika kikenaimonoda! (laughs) (It's definitely something you'd only hear in english!)

**Student 2:** Yeah, I only really hear it on English twitter (chuckles). demo, sore wa eigo ga omoshirosa wo tsukurune? (But that's what makes English interesting, right?.)

We found that Peer to Peer interaction was a major driving factor for socializing Japanese second language learners into Japanese-speaking communities, as it allows learners to feel less embarrassed when speaking. For example, Student 3 in the conversation above was initially hesitant to speak Japanese, but by the end, due to peer influence, Student 3 was speaking in Japanese. In addition, practicing speaking through banter with Peers allows the Japanese learner to lessen the embarrassment felt by Schumann's Acculturation model's language shock characteristic, where the learner feels silly about trying to learn the language, leading to the learner being less likely to learn. However, interaction with peers before, after, and during

standard classroom instruction in the Japanese language creates an environment for Japanese language acculturation. As well, speaking with peers often forces Second Language Japanese learners to restructure their speech patterns in manners that may not often be present in regular classroom instruction.

## **Conclusions**

Through both real-time observations and questionnaires given, we concluded that language learners are modeled into their mannerisms and speaking patterns; in simpler terms, they are fostered by the environment they are placed in, whether it be the classroom or another environment. Second Language Japanese learners are modeled and shaped into their environment similar to Bourdieu's Practice Theory. His theory highlights how learners act, think, and speak in specific ways according to the social and cultural settings. Learners learn to understand that they may have to act and speak in accordance to how social and cultural norms have influenced them. Some limitations could be that we mostly observed our own classes in real time while we were in class. We could also have gotten a few face-to-face interviews to better understand people's thoughts regarding their experiences with language acquisition and acculturation in addition to our survey. Even though we did provide short answer responses in replacement of interviews, not every participant provided a 'why' to our questions which could be some missed opinions and interpretations.