

Maximizing Communicative Competence of Foreign Language Learners in Academy:
 Examples of the Japanese as FL learners from Vancouver Canada
 大学における外国語学習者達のコミュニケーション能力最大限化のための模索
 —カナダ・バンクーバーの日本語を外国語とする学習者対象の授業実践より

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1. Introduction

Along with the rapid globalization of the past two or three decades, the exploration of alternative strategies to better support the increasing level learner diversity in contemporary classrooms became a chief agenda for educators and researchers, including those in the field of foreign or additional language education sociolinguistics. I am one of them, especially as an educator and researcher who supports a pluralistic educational approach (see Section 2). As part of my initiative to find creative and effective ways to motivate my students, it has been my intention to utilize plurilingual and multiliteracies resources to provide spaces where they can utilize their own talent for JFL learning. In this sense, I set up a pilot study with a main goal of examining how the essence of “Hyōgen” [expressive or communicative] is closely related to the JFL learning, with a highlight on the activation and capitalization of the learner’s ‘multicompetence’. A focus is on looking at how the use of prior linguistic knowledge and new medial tools can be an asset to Japanese as foreign language (JFL) teaching and learning. Mainly based on a review of the feedback from a group of JFL learners from the basic Japanese classes at the post-secondary institutions in Western Canada, I argue that strategic use of the multiliteracies resources has a positive effect on foreign language education. In what follows, I will briefly go over relevant literature (section 2), describe the setting and data source of the study (section 3), and discuss the key findings (section 4), followed by concluding remarks (section 5).

2. Multicompetence, plilingualism & ‘mobility’ of learners

The notion of ‘multicompetence’, as developed by the British scholar Vivian Cook in the early 1990s, brought significant implications to the study of the unique features of plurilingual speakers/learners’ competence, notably the idea that multilingual speakers develop a different metalinguistic awareness when compared to speakers who are competent in only one language (Moore & Gajo, 2009). Cook (1992) argues that the second language (L2) user who develops a multicompetence that is considerably different from a monolingual competence. He considers a key reason for this difference in competence to be because the multilingual learner cannot simply be described as a monolingual with some extra knowledge. That is, “in contrast to monolinguals, bi- or multilinguals have a different knowledge of their L1, their L2, a different kind of language awareness and a different language processing system” (Jessner, 2008, p.21).

The framework of plurilingualism and the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence offer more complex and dynamic conceptions and understandings of competence in multiple languages, giving greater attention to the speaker’s voice and self-determination, and to the possibilities of empowerment and resistance through differentiated language use, choices and actions (Coste, Moore &

Zarate, 2009). Its highlight is on the significance of activating, developing and capitalizing on ‘multicompetence’ of the plurilingual learners for their empowered learning. Plurilingualism can be understood as the study of individuals’ repertoires and agency in several languages, in different contexts, in which the individual is the locus and *actor* of contact. Accordingly, a person’s languages and cultures interrelate and change over time, depending on individual biographies, social trajectories, and life paths (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 1997; 2009). In particular, plurilingualism does not describe separate competences in fixed and labelled languages, but views languages as “mobile resources” (Blommaert, 2010, p.43) within an integrated repertoire (Lüdi & Py, 2009).

The term ‘plurilingual competence’ adds emphasis on learners’ agency, and constraints and opportunities in educational contexts (Marshall & Moore, 2016). More specifically, plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to “the ability [of a plurilingual speaker] to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social actor has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures.” (Coste et al., 2009, p.v) For Coste et al. (2009), the specific nature of the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence is defined by a complex intermeshing of socio-linguistic representations and language practices (p.22). At the same time, plurilingual individuals’ competencies are not perfect by definition (Lüdi & Py, 2009); they vary in different contexts and situations and are dependent on biographic circumstances, which play important roles in the learning process and the development of identity. In brief, the framework of plurilingualism reflects the importance of acknowledging and promoting “plurality” at educational institutions. It places emphasis on understanding the nature of and conceptualizations pertaining to diverse learners’ plurilingual competence, and their strong connections to learners’ academic performance in classrooms.

An increased level of (physical and virtual) mobility of the learners has also become a key factor related to the diversity in contemporary classrooms. In particular, the politics concerning the competence of a foreign/additional language learner (i.e., a plurilingual learner) is no longer only about matters of the nativeness of the language speaker (e.g., accent), but also involves other dynamic factors (Darvin & Norton, 2016) including increased level of plurilingual learners’ ‘mobility’ between multiple linguistic, cultural, and geographical spaces. The rapid development of technological new media tools in today’s ‘network society’ adds another dimension to mobility as they navigate new virtual spaces of learning and communication. In this sense, to understand the ‘mobility’ of new generation learners today is another essential key for better support the learner diversity. People’s increased mobility often impacts the linguistic landscapes that are used to understand societies (Blommaert, 2013). In turn, the impact of increased diversity in classrooms often triggers questions about “the foundations of our knowledge and assumptions about societies, how they operate and function at all levels, from the lowest level of human face-to-face communication all the way up to the highest levels of structure in the world system” (Ibid., p.11).

3. Learning a foreign language

The main tension between monolingual and multilingual views of the competencies of plurilingual speakers (i.e., foreign language learners) can be revealed by the complex discourses on the role of a language learner’s prior linguistic knowledge and

experience, such as if foreign language learners' prior linguistic knowledge is framed as an asset or hindrance in their foreign language (as L2 or L3) learning. This includes the role of mother tongue (L1) in learning a foreign language and whether language contact markers in discourses are viewed in the learners' L1 knowledge as interfering with or positively transferring in learning a new language. In the field of foreign language education, inconsistent understandings of plurilingual speakers' communicative competence have generated lack of consensus about important aspects of FL/L3 learners and their learning processes (see Ehlert, 2018, pp. 45-46).

3.1 Perceptions of the use of L1 or new media tools

Traditionally, some language teachers have been reluctant to allow students to use multiliteracies resources (i.e., prior linguistic knowledge and new media tools) when studying a foreign language, assuming that these tools may interfere their active learning. Indeed, their attitudes to using these resources for foreign language learning are relatively negative. One of teachers' main concerns in using multiliteracies resources is that this may interfere students' learning of the target language (Zhang, 2009), such as Japanese or English. Accordingly, they want to constrain students from using either their prior linguistic knowledge or new media tools. A good example of such concern would be that students might depend on multiliteracies resources too much; consequently, these resources may become offer a means of cheating - such as new media tools which allow students access to online resources - for their homework. These concerns are valid; however, I would like to argue that it is time for us to think about the strategies of active use of multiliteracies resources as an empowerment tool for foreign language education. This includes for JFL teaching and learning, as highlighted in the "Hyōgen" approach throughout various discussions at the 6th annual conference of the Canadian Association of Japanese Language Education (CAJLE, 2019). In my view, educators should encourage (rather than discourage) our students to use multiliteracies tools for their language learning; it is particularly for increasing their agency in communication for deeper learning and enhanced learning experiences.

At the same time, many educators support the positive effects of multiliteracies tools in language learning (e.g., Boschman & Ehlert, 2016; Cook, 1992; Cummins, 2006; Jessner, 2008; Zhang, 2005), especially in the past two decades. For instance, Zhang (2005) puts forward the "double positive transfer" learning model, and argues that English as L3 learner's knowledge of the prior two languages (e.g., Korean and Chinese) has a positive effect on their L3 learning with proper input by the teacher (see *Note 1*). This is because,

In most of the roles of the L1 that we have looked at, there is the common theme that the L1 provides a familiar and effective way of quickly getting to grips with the meaning and content of what needs to be used in the L2 [or L3]. It is foolish to arbitrarily exclude this proven and efficient means of communicating meaning. ... The L1 needs to be seen as a useful tool that like other tools should be used where needed but should not be over-used. (Nation, 2003, p.5)

As Nation highlighted over one and a half decades ago, if it was implemented appropriately, using L1 can be an empowerment tool to enhance foreign language learning. The key here is about the importance of activating and capitalizing on the

multicompetence of our learners in an educational setting like a JFL classroom. Therefore, I consider that a chief mission for us - language educators – is to actively explore the strategic utilization of students’ multiliteracies resources.

3.2 An initiative with the pluralistic approach

As an advocate of a pluralistic approach, a wholistic model that highlight the learner-centered method (e.g., as described by Castellottie & Moore, 2010; Cummins, 2006), I have been exploring different strategies and tools for empowering my students. As mentioned previously, my main goal is to better help these plurilingual learners’ more effective learning, and to enhance their communicative competence development. A key strategy that I have been implementing in my JFL classes is utilizing their multiple linguistic resources, and generation specific resources such as new media tools. For instance, I tried to have them to use their prior linguistic knowledge as a reference for helping their learning of new language like Japanese. I also found that my knowledge in Chinese, Korean and English was useful as a reference for helping their understanding.

Making comparisons between prior linguistic knowledge (L1/L2 or L3) and target language (Japanese) is one main strategy that has been employed in my classes. Often, I have students observe the similarities and differences between Japanese and the languages that they already know. Here is an example of how I use my prior linguistic knowledge of English, Chinese and Korean language for helping students develop more effective ways of Japanese vocabulary. The use of Chinese and Korean is limited to the classes wherein some students speak those languages.

Picture 1: Strategic Use of Prior Linguistic Knowledge - Kanji

1) Strategic Use of prior linguistic knowledge (L1 or L2) can enhance students’ Foreign Language learning

For Effective & Efficient Learning

- making a comparison
- helping the transition

週末 周六 周日
星期一 星期二

週末 주말 Weekend

月曜日 월요일 Monday
火曜日 화요일 Tuesday
水曜日 수요일 Wednesday
木曜日 목요일 Thursday
金曜日 금요일 Friday
土曜日 토요일 Saturday
日曜日 일요일 Sunday

As shown in the Picture 1, when introducing Japanese Kanji words concerning the days in a week, I give a brief explanation about the similarities and differences between English/Chinese/Korean and Japanese (see Note 2). For instance, I first explain the similarity in the structure of the words among these languages: “曜日” ようび (yoobi) in Japanese, matches “day” in English, 요일(yoil) in Korean, and 星期(xing-qi) in Chinese.

In the case of teaching Japanese Kanji words to Chinese-speaking students, I first have students think about and make a comparison between Chinese and Japanese. They often can easily come up with some good examples within a few minutes. Here is a summary of four main examples concerning Chinese vs. Japanese Kanji words that have been brought up in the introductory level classes that I taught.

- 1) *Same writing and with same meanings (and different pronunciation):*
 - 学校 (means ‘a school’, and pronounces as ‘xue-xiao’ in Chinese, ‘gakkoo’ in Japanese)
 - 愉快 (means ‘fun’, and pronounces as ‘yu-kuai’ in Chinese, ‘yukai’ in Japanese)
- 2) *Same writing but with different meanings:*
 - 大丈夫 (‘da-zhang-fu’ in Chinese meaning ‘a big man’, ‘daijyobu’ in Japanese which indicates ‘it’s fine’)
 - 手紙 (‘shou-zhi’ in Chinese meaning ‘toilet paper’, ‘tegami’ in Japanese which indicates ‘a letter’)
- 3) *Different writing and different pronunciations but with similar meanings:*
 - 周一 (means ‘monday’, and pronounces as ‘zhou-yi’ in Chinese)
 - 月曜日 (means ‘monday’, and pronounces as ‘getsuyoubi’ in Japanese)
- 4) *Different writing but with different meanings and pronunciation:*
 - 娘 (means ‘mother’ in Chinese and ‘daughter’ in Japanese; pronounces as ‘niang’ in Chinese, ‘musume’ in Japanese)

The above examples are the results of a 5-10 minutes group discussion. Students informed me that such discussion increased their awareness of how their prior linguistic knowledge can be an asset to their learning of Japanese. See Section 4 for more details.

3.3 A Pilot Study

The key objective of this exploratory paper is two-fold: first, to investigate the use of prior linguistic knowledge (e.g., L1 or L2) on foreign language (as L3) teaching and learning; second, to look at how the utilization of other multiliteracies resources like new media tools can be a positive learning tool for JFL learners. The main data for this pilot study is based on my students’ feedback, (the midterm and) the end of term informal and voluntary reflectional notes, from the introductory level JFL classes especially between 2016 and 2019. It was with a key objective of have a better understanding of students’ view on my pedagogical approaches, including the pluralist approach that I have been implementing in my classes. In particular, I asked their opinions on how the use of multiple linguistic and literacy resources are related to foreign language learning. Questions asked including: Do you find the use of prior linguistic knowledge (e.g., L1 or L2) and new media tools useful in learning Japanese? If Yes, hope you can share some relevant examples.

4. A summary of key findings & related examples

As previously noted, I feel gratified that student feedback from my JFL classes reveal their affirmation of my pedagogical approach. They consider my use of prior linguistic knowledge as part of instructional media was helpful. As briefly addressed in Section 3.2, they reported that this (e.g., making a comparison between familiar and new languages) helped them to (re)think about different ways to use their prior linguistic and multiliteracies knowledge. In terms of their opinions on the use of their first language or

other previously learned language knowledge in learning Japanese, most students mentioned that they were regularly using their knowledge in other languages as an important tool for more effective and efficient learning of their target language.

4.1 Use of prior linguistic knowledge

4.1.1 Chinese vs. Japanese

Most students of Chinese as L1 considered that the pluralistic approach that implemented in my JFL classes was helpful. They shared their experiences and rationale of how and why they prefer to use their prior linguistic knowledge in learning Japanese. As a general approach, they shared to two main strategies: mainly making a comparison between Chinese and Japanese, with occasional translation from Chinese to Japanese and vice versa. On the one hand, most students confirmed positive impact of their knowledge in Chinese on learning Japanese and shared their experiences. In particular, they consider competence in Chinese helped them to better understand some new vocabulary and expressions, as well as the grammar structures in Japanese. They informed that using Chinese as a reference to learn Japanese was very helpful for a more effective study of their target language – Japanese. For them, using Chinese makes it “easier to understand and answer the questions quickly” (Student M, a Japanese as a L3 learner who speaks Mandarin Chinese as L1 and English as L2). As noted by Students A and B, this is because

- There is some similarity between Chinese characters and Japanese Kanji, so using Mandarin to explain can help me a lot in understanding. (Student S; Han)
- Sometimes just need to memorize the meaning of new vocab/words and pronunciation; some words [in Japanese] are exactly the same meaning as Chinese. (Student A; Ai)

In the case of JFL as L3 or L4 learners, some of them, like Students J, M and O, considered that their prior linguistic knowledge in Chinese helped a lot in a better understanding of the Japanese context.

- I’m a speaker of Mandarin, Cantonese, and English with Japanese being my 4th language. Meilan’s [the instructor’s] use of first or second language in class was really helpful because of the similarity between Japanese and Mandarin. In addition, it’s easier to understand the grammar of Japanese with Mandarin as a reference. (Student O)
- Applying Cantonese, Mandarin, and English in a Japanese class is helpful, because there are Kanji and borrowed words in English [Loan words] which makes it easier to guess the context. (Student J or John)

On the other hand, some students reported that they occasionally use translation approach but not very frequently. For them, like Student M stated, “using Mandarin to translate Japanese first helps to understand the meaning in Japanese.”

A small number of students stated their position in this matter as: “I don’t mind the use of L1/L2 in class, but don’t find it necessarily helpful” (Student X).

4.1.2 Korean vs. Japanese

Students speaking Korean as L1 or L2 informed that the use of heritage language helped making easier connection to Japanese. In the case of Eunji, for instance, a Korean student who often used Korean in class - especially for her reasons why she wrote down

Japanese Kanji pronunciation in Korean for the dictation part of in-class quizzes, mentioned that

There are words which have similar pronunciations and meanings in Korean and Japanese. For example, in Korean, “mock-yoil” which means Thursday, is ‘mokuyooobi’ in Japanese. Wednesday is “soo-yoil” in Korean, and “suiyooobi” in Japanese. Because of these similarities, I wrote down the Japanese pronunciation in Korean which can be written faster and then checked the answer. This way helps to make an easier connection to Japanese.

Oh-young (Student J), an English as L1 and Korean as L2 speaker, also reported the use of her L1 (Korean) knowledge was helpful especially in learning new Japanese words.

4.1.3 English/French vs. Japanese

Students who could not speak East Asian languages also provided positive comments on this approach. For instance, three students (Sammie, Tim and Nick) that I shall introduce below constantly made their prior linguistic knowledge as an essential reference in the mastery of a new language (JFL).

Sammie, an English as L1 speaker who was learning Japanese as her fifth language (L5), was one student who shared her experience of actively utilizing her prior linguistic knowledge (in French) for more effective study of new vocabulary building and correct pronunciation in Japanese:

When Meilan [the instructor] speaks in another language, it seems to help those students who speak that language understand better. I speak English, Urdu, Hindi, and French and I sometimes relate these to Japanese. For example, パン (pan; Japanese) means bread in Japanese, and “pain” (pronounced as “pan”) in French also means bread (1, 2).

Tim, a speaker of English, French and Spanish, also shared a similar experience in his learning of Japanese as L4. He stated that he occasionally made comparisons with other languages, to help his understanding of new Japanese vocabulary or pronunciation in Japanese. As an example, he brought up how he used Spanish (L3) to learn the word Bread in Japanese:

I like to try and use Spanish pronunciation to help with Japanese pronunciation as they are similar. Ex. casa is house in Spanish, pan パン is bread in Spanish.

The case of Nick is another good example of how the students strategically use their prior linguistic knowledge to enhance their JFL learning. Like Sammie, Nick is a multilingual speaker. As a fluent speaker of Russian (L1) and English (L2), he was familiar with Spanish. He shared various experiences of how his plurilingual competence affected his learning of Japanese (L4). In particular, he approved the use of English as an empowerment tool for a deeper understanding of Japanese sentence structure. In a voluntary reflection during the last week of a Basic Japanese II course that I taught recently, Nick responded:

Of course, I find the use of our previous linguistic background useful. I don’t necessarily know anything directly applicable (e.g. Chinese), as I only know romantic’ languages (Russian, English, Spanish), but I do find the references to say, English, very useful. Referencing a language, I already know, and showing how the same sentence differs between

Japanese and English helps with my structure. For example, learning many phrases in Japanese could be correctly structured in Japanese by first structuring them in English, then reversing the order of the words, and replacing them with Japanese characters. An example is:

“I wish to go to China someday” (English) <reversed->

“Someday, to China to go, I wish.” (Japanese) [いつか 中国に行きたい]

In summary, as shown in the above excerpts from students, an appropriate and comparative approach can be an empowerment tool for a better foreign/additional language learning. Hence, I argue that strategic implementation of such a comparative approach motivates students’ active learning of target language. This approach fosters foreign language learning through multilingual comparison, allowing a more effective building of new vocabulary or a deeper understanding of the sentence structures in Japanese.

4.2 Utilization of new media tools

As a tentative finding on the utilization of new media tools, there are some interesting and meaningful feedback from students. Most of them mentioned their regular use of new media tools and online resources as a tool for more effective and efficient JFL learning, especially in the out of classroom settings. Examples were given including Google translate, Anime, Manga, online dictionary, YouTube videos, DuoLingo and Genki App. Similar to using prior linguistic knowledge, they noted that utilizing these resources helped their deeper learning of target language - Japanese.

Three main types of use of new media tools and online resources were reported. *Firstly*, new media tools and online resources were used to develop more efficient new vocabulary and sentence structures, as well as to improve typing and check errors. Most students reported that the apps from Google (e.g., Online Japanese dictionary, typing software, and google translate) are the preferred ones. *Secondly*, the students use the new media tools and online resources for better understanding of the class content (new vocabulary and expressions, grammar points, pronunciation, sentence structures), and for more effective study of new grammar points and sentence structures in target language (Japanese). Online video is another popular new media tool; more than half of the students in my recent JFL classes informed me that they often use the grammar videos (e.g., Youtube.com or Yahoo Japan). *Finally*, some students also noted that these new media tools helped them to have better class performance especially through reviewing and mastering new and additional language and cultural knowledge, as well as viewing new form of presentation styles beyond the textbook. They also commented that online course administration platforms like Canvas or Blackboard were helpful. For example, online notes helped them especially by allowing them to have a more focused study and review of the course materials. So that they can “perform better in Japanese class” (Student G), as well as to monitor individual learning process and encourage them to “work harder if the marks are low” (Student I). In addition, one more aspect that needs to be considered in the implementation of the new media tools here is to set up the new media tools properly, so that they do not end up being a waste of time. This can be done by improving the ease-of-use of the system and training of instructors in order to increase their effectiveness with new media tools.

5. Concluding remarks

The main goal of this pilot study was on the discussion of the types of positive impact made by the multiliteracies tools, especially for the improvement of communicative competence of JFL learners. The study highlights the significance of integrating more transformative and communicative pedagogy into foreign language education, along with related implications for active teaching, learning and research. In particular, it is with a consideration that “Cultivating meeting in difference by encouraging a creation of something new in each encounter with the other would be one way of establishing new forms of pedagogy that help students learn to coexist with the other without putting oneself, the other, or another down.” (Mikulan, 2014, p. 105) In this sense, as I argue, strategic use of multiliteracies tools is particularly important due to its strong connection to the plurilingual learners’ increased agency in communication, resulting in deeper learning and enhanced learning experiences. As shown in examples of the multiliteracies outputs in Section 4, it is possible to utilize students’ multiple linguistic and new media resources to enhance their learning experiences. Ultimately this can be a strong tool for their better engagement in language learning. The sky is the limit, and there should be more creative and fun ways to use multiliteracies for more attractive and interactive foreign language learning.

The pitfall of the pluralistic educational approach, however, can be the possibility of giving too much agency to the learners. As briefly noted in Section 3.1, allowing students’ active use of multiliteracies tools in the out of classroom context may also have negative influence on JFL learning. Therefore, it is essential for the instructor to follow up and monitor this more self-regulated learning process on a regular basis. To address this potential problem, two main strategies can be use: a) to be informative and proactive, by providing some useful resources through the course website such as on Canvas or Blackboard; b) to be supportive, by inviting students to ask questions regularly. It is my sincere hope that this study provides insight into the complexity in the representation of multilingualism and the JFL (plurilingual) learners in and out of today’s dynamic classrooms, in order to inform educational institutions, educators and policy makers who are involved in multilingual education in a Diaspora or other dynamic contexts.

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NOTES

1. The intention of the double positive transfer teaching model is to promote a strategic integration of cross-linguistic knowledge, which highlights the importance of utilizing students’ bi-/multilingual knowledge in order to maximize double positive transfer. Nan’s (2008) studies exemplify strategies for the successful implementation of the positive transfer teaching model in FL/L3 teaching, with some examples of the potential for a learner’s prior knowledge of other languages that bridge learning.

2. As for more related examples of a comparative studies about Chinese, Japanese and Korean words, also see UBC Chinese-Japanese-Korean (CJK) Multimedia Dictionary at www.ubccjk.com/, an online dictionary especially as “Technology-enhanced Chinese character learning resources for use in ‘CJK’ (Chinese-Japanese-Korean) language courses” sponsored and created by the Department of Asian Studies at University of British Columbia, BC, Canada.

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