

Critical Literacy in Beginner-Level Japanese Language Classrooms

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This paper describes a critical literacy session held with 19 beginner-level learners of Japanese at a Japanese university. The students observed and analyzed the use (or nonuse) of gendered speech styles (especially feminine language [*onna kotoba*]) in different media. They also translated a short passage from a video interview with Emma Watson from English to Japanese and discussed whether they would use feminine language in their translations. The learning journals that students submitted after class demonstrate students' reflection on this topic, including students' evaluation and questions on feminine language and whether and how they would use feminine language in their own translation. The findings suggest possibly introducing critical literacy, even to beginner-level students with limited knowledge of the target language, especially through use of the L1.

本稿は、日本の大学で19名の初級日本語学習者に行ったクリティカル・リテラシーの実践の報告である。本実践では、様々な日本語メディアにおけるジェンダー表現(特に女ことば)の使用を観察・分析した後、エマ・ワトソンのビデオインタビューの一部を翻訳し、自らの翻訳で女ことばを使用するかなど話し合った。学習者の提出した学習日記では、女ことばについての評価や疑問、自身の翻訳での女ことばの使用の有無など、ジェンダー表現についての様々な省察が見られた。本実践では学習者の母語を使用することにより、目標言語の知識が限られている初級学習者にもクリティカル・リテラシーの実践ができることの示唆が得られた。

This paper is a report on a critical literacy session held with 19 beginner-level learners of Japanese at a Japanese university. I analyzed the students' journals and examined how they perceived their own experience and learning through the session. The study provides support for possibly introducing critical literacy even to beginner-level students, highlighting the role that the L1¹ can play.

In this paper, critical literacy is defined as a pedagogical approach that focuses on the importance of raising students' critical language awareness, including understanding political and ideological issues implicated in the language (Iwasaki & Kumagai, 2008, p. 130). This means literacy is not just reading or writing the text but also about engaging in linguistic analysis of texts to understand power relations; that is, what is written is how authors view the event, influenced by a certain ideology or ideologies. It also necessitates self-reflection for problematizing and interrogating taken-for-granted concepts by both the teacher and students (Iwasaki & Kumagai, 2008, p. 130).

Background

There has been an increased interest in implementing critical literacy in Japanese language classrooms (Iwasaki & Kumagai, 2008, 2011; Kumagai, 2007a, 2007b; Kumagai & Fukai, 2009; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2016). For example, Kumagai (2007a) implemented a textbook rewriting project in which students read the description of an American university in their textbook, compared and analyzed the description using data they independently collected, and rewrote the text accordingly. Iwasaki and Kumagai (2008) also reported a reading activity in which students compared the same news reported in Japanese and English. Gyogi (in press) used translation to elicit intermediate-level students' critical reflection on gendered speech. The results show the session enabled students to contemplate (a) self-values and client values vis-à-vis using gendered style in translation and (b) whether to reproduce, negotiate, or resist using gendered style in their own translations. Some students even expanded on their thoughts to a more general observation of the language, that is, how language is used to construct meaning.

However, little attention has been paid on how this could be used in beginner-level Japanese language classrooms, with some exceptions such as Sato and Loetscher (2011).² In their study, beginner-level students analyzed and critically reflected on the uses of Japanese orthography, especially katakana, beyond those typically described in

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the textbooks. Kern (2002) argued that there is a gap between beginning/intermediate courses and advanced courses in language teaching. Beginner classes emphasize language use for everyday social interaction, memorization, and practice without cognitively challenging tasks; advanced courses stress formal and literary use and focus on critical discussion and formal oral presentations. Maxim (2006) viewed the overly simple tasks in the beginner-level class as problematic because students are ill prepared for advanced-level courses that require critical analysis of authentic texts. Furthermore, practical and functional emphasis in language teaching may transform languages into commodities and deprive students of opportunities to enrich themselves (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004).

Thus, through this practical study, I have attempted to introduce critical literacy at a beginner-level language classroom by using translation, with the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do students perceive their own experience and learning through translation activities?
- RQ2. What are the benefits and limitations of translation activities in introducing critical literacy in beginner-level classrooms?

Translation can contribute to developing critical literacy, as students can use their own language(s) without relying entirely on the target language. As mentioned above, Gyogi's study (in press) showed its potential at the intermediate level. This study was an attempt to implement critical literacy through translation with beginner-level students in a different context, with modifications.

Gendered Speech Styles

The focus of the session was on gendered speech styles in Japanese, especially *onna kotoba* (women's language or feminine language). Feminine language is "a cultural knowledge of a feminine speech style distinctively associated with the image of urban middle-class women" (Inoue, 2003, p. 315). The term "feminine language" is controversial because of its false assumption of the existence of "language" that indicates the social role of a person. Feminine language is rather a degree of femininity indexed through using certain sentence-final particles (such as *wa* and *no*), first-person pronouns (such as *atashi*), the politeness level, and the pitch of the voice, because of their stereotypical associations with femininity. What is interesting about this feminine language is that most women do not use it in reality (Nakamura, 2007). Instead, it is frequently used by female characters in novels, drama scripts, movies, manga, and translations (Nakamura,

2007). Thus, feminine language represents a linguistic belief of how women will or should talk, rather than how women actually talk.

Feminine language was chosen as it is considered a suitable topic that prompts students' critical reflection because of gender ideologies that are implicated in the language. Further, it allows for comparison with intermediate learners, as a similar session was already implemented with intermediate-level learners, as described above (Gyogi, in press). It should be noted that students in this study discussed other linguistic features, including other speech styles indicating the social roles of a person (including masculine language), the use of orthography, onomatopoeia, and speech styles in other sessions.

Methodology

Participants and Settings

The participants were 19 beginner-level students at a Japanese university as detailed in Figure 1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect privacy. The students take beginner-level Japanese classes four times a week, using Genki I and Genki II (Banno, Ikeda, Ohno, Shinagawa, & Tokashiki, 2011a, 2011b).

Age	19-24
Gender	Male 5, Female 14
Status	Short-term exchange students, staying in Japan for three months to one year
Nationality	US (10), Taiwan (3), UK (2), Brunei (1), Honduras (1), Korea (1), New Zealand (1)
L1	English (14), Mandarin (2), Chinese (1), Spanish (1), Korean (1)
Major	History, economics, literature, etc.

Figure 1. Profile of participants (N = 19). As reported by students themselves in the questionnaire. Numbers in parentheses signify the number of students.

The session was part of a project on using translation in a multilingual language classroom. The students participated in five volunteer, extracurricular sessions and each session was organized around a translation task of different authentic texts, including Instagram, manga, and TV commercials. The session from which data was collected

for this study was the third class of these sessions, in which students translated a video interview of the film star Emma Watson.

Data Collection

In the classroom, students translated a sentence from an interview video of Emma Watson, with the following translation brief: You are working for Cinema Today, and you want to continue a good relationship with it. You have been asked to translate an interview video of Emma Watson from English to Japanese. Cinema Today (<https://www.cinematoday.jp/>) is a cinema website that is written in Japanese. On Cinema Today, interviews with actresses are frequently translated using the sentence-final particles *wa* and *no*, that is, with one of the typical features of feminine language.

The session was sequenced as follows: (a) warm-up exercise; (b) explanation of feminine language; (c) in-class translation and discussion; and (d) homework. As a warm-up exercise, the students first browsed the website and discussed the website's design and its possible target readers. Then, students looked at interview articles of four actresses taken from Cinema Today: Two were translated interviews of French and Chinese actresses and two were interviews of Japanese actresses based on natural Japanese conversation. Although the sentence-final particles *wa* and *no* frequently appeared in the translated interviews, they did not appear in interviews based on natural Japanese conversation. Students counted the number of sentence-final particles used in each article and discussed the reasons behind these differences.

Afterwards, the students were briefly introduced to Nakamura's (2007) work, which explained that women do not use feminine language in reality although it is frequently used by female characters in novels, drama scripts, movies, manga, and translations. They were also shown a PowerPoint presentation prepared by the teacher on other examples of gendered speech styles in anime, drama, and movies as well as screenshots of two websites to compare how the same person can be translated with or without feminine language. After that, facilitated by the teacher, they discussed in class how they felt about each translation, as well as how using these particles may change readers' perceptions.

After this, students were introduced to the task and watched a video of Emma Watson discussing the film *Beauty and the Beast*. They discussed the purpose, target readers, and mode of the source text and target text. In class, the students translated the following sentences: "I was just so in love. It was so funny and so romantic." The students translated them independently and then formed pairs to compare their translations. Some students presented to the class with their justifications. The students discussed whether and how much they would use feminine language in their translations and how

to translate a video clip into an interview article. Afterward, they were given homework to translate a different video clip of Emma Watson with the same translation brief.

As a dataset, I used learning journals the students submitted after the class. Despite the known limitations of journals concerning the honesty and completeness of their account, a learning journal gives precious insight into students' perception and reflection (McKay, 2009) and is useful for promoting students' reflective and critical thinking (Li, 1998). Students were asked to write whatever they thought about their translation assignment and the session in their learning journals, without any specification as to what they should include. There were no requirements regarding length and all students wrote them in English with the occasional use of Japanese words.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted for analysis of the data collected. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify and describe recurring patterns in qualitative data, focusing on "what is said." All learning journals the students submitted were used as a dataset and no coding guidelines were prepared in advance. The journals were coded sentence-by-sentence based on the content, such as *feminine language*, *tone*, *vocabulary choice*, and the recurring themes were grouped as a category. After the initial coding, each code was checked to confirm that there was no inconsistency within and among the codes. In the coding process, codes were integrated, modified, deleted, or divided as necessary.

Findings

Overall Results

Table 1 shows the number of students and the corresponding themes they mentioned.

The overall results show these translation activities made the students reflect on different issues involved in translation, not just *feminine language*. However, as this session's focus was gendered speech styles, the two most recurring themes both concerned feminine language. *Feminine language (general)* refers to students' comments on feminine language in Japanese. *Feminine language (their own translation)* refers to whether and how students would use feminine language in translation. Other themes were related to conveying the tone of the text, changing a spoken video into written form, the editing process necessary after translating, and the complexity of translation itself.

Table 1. Recurrent Themes in Student Journals, Results of Coding (N = 19)

Themes (mentioned by more than 3 students)	No. of students
Feminine language (general)	16
Feminine language (their own translation)	9
Tone	8
Spoken vs written	8
Editing	6
Translation	5
Vocabulary choice	3
Media	3
Limited knowledge (of Japanese language)	3

The next sections will focus on the two most recurring themes: *feminine language (general)* and *feminine language (their own translation)* in detail.

Feminine Language (General)

For the theme *feminine language (general)*, seven out of 16 students mentioned their new knowledge on feminine language indexed through using certain linguistic features as well as the use of feminine language in translation.

Six students evaluated the use of feminine language, as shown in Agnes's excerpt:

It also seems like a much more creative style of translation. I think it is not necessarily wrong to use words to project a certain image of someone, but I think that because that image is usually an opinion, it could be bad or cause problems to project that image to everyone. While I think it is fun to be able to do that, it might be unfair to the person who is translated if they have no say over the way they are portrayed.

Similarly, Yan, who is bilingual in English and Chinese, stated that gendered speech styles, including feminine and masculine ones, might lead to giving "different impressions of the person to the reader."

Three students cast doubt on feminine language and the discussions they had in class. For example, Daisy questioned what the Japanese perceive of these particles:

I am curious if the Japanese see the added particles as undermining the integrity of the celebrity. I believe that the Japanese don't think much about the particles and do not [*sic*] them as an insult.

Daisy said she asked her Japanese friend about how they perceive these styles in media, reporting that her friend did not see the particles as creating any negative image of celebrities. Shu-hui also questioned the use of feminine language in the translation of "real" people as follows:

I still not quite understand why they do so, if they actually don't use it in daily life [*sic*]. I mean if it is in comic or anime I think it might be ok, but interview articles are supposed to be more "real."

As such, this session made the students reflect on gender implicated in the language and how the use of feminine language affects the reader's perception.

Feminine Language (Students' Translations)

Nine students mentioned they would use feminine language in their own translations. Four students said they would use feminine language at least to some degree and five students mentioned they would not use it.

Among those who used the feminine language, Ellen used the feminine linguistic feature *wa* based on both the actress' image and the norms of the client and commented as follows:

In this translation I make use of the ending particle *wa* as this gives the image of a sophisticated lady which I believe Emma Watson has the characteristics of . . . Moreover, this is the style that the client, Cinema Today, typically uses and therefore it will fit the job criteria much better.

Daisy also used the feminine sounding particles *wa* and *no*. Although she was uncertain whether they capture the actress' personality, she prioritized the client's values, saying "Cinema Today is my current employer. I wanted to follow their preferred article and translation structure."

In contrast, Adam did not use the feminine-sounding particles, arguing that he prioritized Emma Watson's image rather than his immediate client:

I feel that she [Emma Watson] does not particularly fit the stereotype attached to the particles, nor would she happily enjoy the connotation attached to her speech, being a feminist.

Despite the different strategies taken, the students contemplated the client's value and the celebrity's image in doing the translations. The benefit of translation is that students have choices in translation, rather than pursuing one "correct" answer. This choice seems to have made students think about whether and how much femininity they would attach to their own translation.

Discussion

The results show how translation activities help students to go beyond the decoding of the text. As demonstrated by the students' excerpts, about half of the students evaluated and questioned the use of gendered speech styles (especially feminine language), as well as the possible consequences of using such a style. The students also thought about whether and how they would use feminine language in their translation, reflecting on their own values and the client's values. As with intermediate students (Gyogi, in press), the results also show that beginner-level students can reflect, evaluate, and question feminine language, as well as examine ways of appropriate use through translation itself.

The study's results give two possible benefits of translation activities. First, the use of students' L1 enables them to engage in such a cognitively challenging task relatively easily. Introducing ideology implicated in language might be challenging, if not impossible (e.g., Sato & Loetscher, 2011), in the beginner-level classroom if the teacher uses the target language alone. The use of L1 in this study enabled students to engage in in-depth discussions and reflection on power relations that authors create in text.

Second, the translation task also allowed for introducing such a session within the context of the language classroom. The use of feminine language in translation can be taught through lectures to beginner-level students in their L1. However, translation has the advantage of making students engage in the target language in the language classroom. As shown in students' discussions on using feminine language in translation, these activities enabled them to consider whether and how they would reproduce, change, or negotiate gender ideologies implicated in the language.

However, this session also revealed two limitations. First, no student seemed to connect their learning with their everyday language use as far as this study was concerned. As shown in the *feminine language (general)* section, students' comments were on the new knowledge learned through the session or their evaluations and doubts. In the similar session previously conducted with intermediate students (Gyogi, in press), some students reflected on not only the translation task but also their everyday use of the target language and their identity as Japanese users—that is, how their choice of words is perceived. In other words, at least for some intermediate learners, the session prompted

reflection and problematization of themselves that they might not have previously considered. For the beginner-level students in this study, there was no self-reflection on their own taken-for-granted concepts, which is considered an important component of critical literacy (Kumagai, 2007b).

Second, although their process, as shown in the excerpts above, shows students' understanding of and reflection on the topic, it does not ensure the quality of students' final products. Although they partially translated relatively simple sentences, the students' translation products were sometimes incomprehensible. As shown in the "overall results" section, three students mentioned their limited knowledge in producing what they wished to do. For beginner-level students, if one wants to ensure the quality of a translation using authentic texts, the direction of translation might need to be reversed (i.e., Japanese to their L1(s)).

Despite issues in the depth of their reflection and quality of translation, the advantages of translation include introducing a cognitively challenging task within the context of a language classroom in a relatively easy way.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined how a critical literacy session can be implemented with beginner-level students using translation activities. The results show some favorable indications on the use of students' L1 in enabling beginner-level students to reflect on ideologies implicated in the language. Despite some issues, such as the quality of their final product, the findings of this session point to the potential of translation activities in going beyond decoding the text to considering power relations (in this case, gender) that authors create in the text, even for beginner-level students with limited knowledge of the target language.

As with other qualitative studies, caution should be paid in generalizing the results. There are limitations in using learning journals as a source of data because of the inherent issue of students' honesty and integrity. The analysis of other data, including audio-recorded class interaction, is necessary for triangulation purposes. Further research can explore how one can integrate such a session in current curricula, especially in classrooms without a common working language other than the target language.

Notes

1. Despite its inaccuracy in describing students' strongest or first language(s), the term first language (L1) is used for simplicity.

2. Although they discuss in the context of “critical content-based language instruction (CCBI),” their work was included here as this is closely related to critical literacy.

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Bio Data

Eiko Gyogi is an assistant professor at Akita International University where she teaches various undergraduate Japanese language courses. She obtained a PhD in linguistics from SOAS, University of London and has previously taught Japanese in the UK and Lebanon. Her research interests includes translation in language teaching, pragmatics, critical literacy, and heritage language learners. <egyogi@aiu.ac.jp>

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