

No-Level Brick Foreign Language Education: Definition of the Field and Explanation of the Purposes – Japanese Language Classroom as Case Study

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Abstract

Today, we frequently observe social discriminations. These are tightly connected to stereotypes and intolerance toward others' values differing to ours. Many of us do not have/take the chance to become aware of and question even our own values and ideologies behind them. Dialogue through a (foreign) language is considered as a 'must' toward social cohesion and mutual understanding (Council of Europe 2001). In much needed citizenship education, foreign language teachers can play a key role (Hosokawa, Otsuji, Mariotti 2016). This paper aims to demonstrate that 'active learning' language classes where learners are asked to think and choose the theme which each of them cares, whatever the themes and language proficiency levels are, can empower learners and teachers to become aware of their own values given they are guided to question the reasons behind their choices and to share their thoughts in meaningful dialogues (Hosokawa, 2019) between them and outside the classroom. This approach can move our classes toward more inclusive ones. The data to support the claim came from interviews, participant observation and submitted texts in three case studies: absolute- beginners (2016), undergraduate (2018), master (2019) Japanese language courses at an Italian university. The analysis focuses on a) interrelations between language proficiency and chosen themes; b) changing awareness toward own and others' values; and c) relationship with peer-facilitators. The showcase will lead to No Level-Brick (NoLBrick) language education project, which suggests a de-standardized transformative-critical language education, where teachers and learners are seen as subjects of a reciprocally empowering citizenship formation process.

Keywords: Nolbrick, critical language pedagogy, Japanese, social responsibility, inclusiveness

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Introduction

The present paper is part of a wider panel jointly presented at the International Academic Forum Hawaii 2020 on field and purposes of NoLBrick transformative language education, investigating how students expectations toward FLE too often refrain them to afford critical thinking and how learning, if seen as participation process, can bring students to become responsible transformative actors in our society.

This panel itself thematized the “No-Level-Brick” dialogic foreign language (FL) education which concerns not increasing learners’ language proficiency-levels but encouraging learners and teachers to co-engage with critical thinking using the FL. Presenters considered that engagement with critical thinking can empower learners and teachers to become aware of their values and responsible for co-creating and co-sustaining a convivial society. Dialogue in an FL can be vital to strive to achieve this end in this increasingly interculturalizing society.

The panel began with questioning the use of prescribed language proficiency-levels as part of a common educational practice in the field of language education. The proficiency-levels may be practical in evaluating and ranking language learners. However, the exclusive focus on the proficiency-levels often overlooks other key aspects in language learning and practice (e.g. contents) and furthermore may prevent individuals from engaging in meaningful dialogues and becoming responsible citizens. What happens if we shift our focus from the proficiency-levels to other aspects?

To answer the question, I designed and implemented the No-Level Brick dialogic Japanese language courses at an Italian university. In my presentation I explained the need for such educational approach and how it can contribute to reciprocally empowering citizenship formation; Alessandrini reported the challenge which the approach may face due to the students’ expectations towards language learning and teaching (*No-Level Brick Japanese Language Education: Expectations Toward Language Teaching*); Kojima focused on the emergence of Communities of Practice (Wenger et al. 2002) where the teaching team dialogically explores what it means by learning and teaching an FL (*No-Level Brick Japanese Language Education: Understanding Learning as Participation in Practice Through a Communities of Practice Perspective*).

No more wall, nor bricks. Dialogic Foreign Language Education

Recently almost every paper of mine starts quoting Pink Floyd’s song: “We don't need no education / We don't need no thought control / ... All in all it's just another brick in the wall. / All in all you're just another brick in the wall” (1970). That is because it summarizes very well my research question “How to empower FL teachers and students *not* to become *another brick in the walls*?”

Critical pedagogy-transformative/problem-posing education aims at empowering students and teachers to individuating, reflecting and questioning upon the ideologies and practices that make them or others feel oppressed and restrained (Freire 1968). We may consider Foreign Language as a privileged field in education, since during foreign language classes students and teachers can discuss any kind of content, as

suggested by Critical Content Based Language Education (CCBLE; Sato et al., 2015) and the Post-communication turn. Farren (2019) outlines some of the most relevant studies about transformative pedagogy, from the perspective of its intercultural and moral-philosophical foundation that underpin autonomous and inter-dependent (Little, 2001) language teaching and learning.

Aiming at values awareness and responsibly co-creating of an intercultural and democratic society, suggest a shifting of focus from a vertical language proficiency labelling dividing wall, to a horizontal cohesion of teachers and learners as social actors, allowing them to accept responsibility for their teaching and learning choices. This suggests the need for a de-standardization and professionalization of teaching processes (Mariotti 2018).

While I identified the research question of my early career outcome BunpoHyDict (*A Hypermedia Dictionary of Japanese Grammar*, now JaLea 2016) as “how to make students remembering grammar faster and beyond exams term?”, my actual utmost aim was developing a tool that could offer freedom of choices in expressing ones thoughts in a foreign language. Such hypermedia grammar dictionary requires autonomous responsibility of (teachers and learners) users’ choices. The above research question had relegated me, as non-native learner, to a subaltern position against the ‘native speaker myth’, while I was actually looking for teachers and learners’ own values awareness and responsibility in own learning and teaching choices. Exactly as Gramsci (1975) conceptualizes in his “hegemony theory”, formulating a-posteriori BunpoHyDict research question, I had internalized, and I was en-joying, the dominant value of ‘native proficiency level’ ideology, against my own (non-native) sake, following the obsessive and oppressive grade-system I had always felt uncomfortable with. But research motivation was such a personal and strong one, that when I was involved in the dialogical active approach of Hosokawa (Hosokawa, 2004) at Waseda University, I finally realized how BunpoHyDict non-linear approach sprung from the heartfelt need of a more personally tailored (autonomous and free) learning path, which took me to a new perspective: The ‘real’ research question I should have asked to myself was: “for the sake of whom am I, or should my students be, obsessed by grammar items divided by levels? I had not been sufficiently trained in critical thinking but only in following system’s instructions, without questioning them or my own well-being: I was “just another brick in the wall” without critical literacy.

Dialogue as freedom to be mutually responsible social actors

The feeling of freedom and empowerment I could experience writing and discussing my thoughts (Mariotti, 2008) was so strong that I started to elaborate Hosokawa’s approach as soon as I had my first class back in Venice in 2011. The sense of discrimination and inadequacy that standard hierarchic levels often produce, somehow melt away during taught classes, giving some space for acknowledging owns and other values, through in-class and outside-class activities in Japanese (Mariotti, 2016). Encouraging dialogue through FLE can bring to critical awareness and questioning our world own views while welcoming others, mutually seeing each other as responsible member of the same community/society, empowering both from concretely act toward social integration instead of toward divide.

Since in every conference presentation about encouraging dialogue as form of critical awareness, the main objection I had received was about the concrete possibility of conducting a dialogic foreign course at zero-beginner level, I will bring the focus on three recent case studies that lead me to consider the need for a no-level Foreign Language Education:

1. *Action Research Zero* (Sept. – Dec. 2016): a volunteering workshop for zero beginners of Japanese (Mariotti& Ichishima, 2017).
2. *Undergraduate 3rd Year* (a.y. 2018/19): a mandatory Japanese Language Course for undergraduate students in their 3rd year.
3. *Graduate 2nd Year* (a.y. 2019/20): a mandatory Japanese Language Course for graduate students.

Purpose of the courses was reaching a responsible critical awareness upon own choices. The common aim was writing a final report through a spiral dialogic process. Learners were requested to write an initial motivational text; have dialogues in & outside of the classroom; give an oral presentation; complete a final report and finally elaborate a self and peer evaluation. The final delivered reports consisted of a motivational paragraph, a dialogue report, and conclusions. In the motivational paragraph, the learners had to describe the relation between the chosen theme and themselves, thinking about the reason why they had chosen such theme. For the dialogue report, they had to choose one person to discuss the motivational paragraph and further reflect on themes and choices. Thereafter, they had to summarize the dialogue contents focusing on what they considered to be ‘turning points’ of the discussion, commenting on the reasons for selecting such quotations. Finally, they had to write conclusions drawn from their initial motivational paragraphs and the report of the whole dialogue processes in and outside of the classroom.

Upon report completion, students had to present to the class, changes that eventually occurred during the whole process, specifically before and after dialoguing inside and outside the classroom. Lastly, students had to discuss and decide criteria for self and peer evaluation, i.e. reflecting upon what they considered most relevant to them. The evaluation criteria chosen by the class, may be summarize as: 1) originality of the final work (would the delivered content be written by any other person than the writer?); 2) consistency of theme development (were motivational text, dialogue and conclusions logically connected?); 3) participation (was the student an active participant to online and in-class discussion, accepting responsibility in stimulating colleagues participation through questions aimed at awareness?); 4) comprehensibility (had the student engaged in finding the best way to convey his/her own ideas, checking grammar and readability?).

After the end of the course, a last reflection upon the whole process was requested, together with the permission to publish the work online. Agreed works can be found at <virgo.unive.it/mariotti>.

The analysis of the three case studies focuses on:

- a) interrelations between language proficiency and chosen themes;
- b) changing awareness toward own and others’ values; and
- c) relationship with peer-facilitators.

Case study 1: Action Research Zero ARZ (Sept. – Dec. 2016)

The course was organized and coordinated in 2016 by Ichishima (Akita University) and Mariotti, supervised by Hosokawa (Waseda University), at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Mariotti & Ichishima, 2017). It gathered 15 volunteering freshmen in Japanese Language, who were divided into 4 groups, with one facilitator each. Facilitators were 3 M.A. students, 1 native speaker guest, and 1 M.A. experienced in the dialogic teaching. Facilitators were not requested to write a report, but only to help in questioning the reasons of each student choice. The output of the course were individual presentations, individual reports and a final reports collection. Upon course completion 3 internship credits would be given if requested. Since the course was not a mandatory one, nor would give any mark, we can assume students had an extremely strong motivation to participate and did not drop off until the end. Dialogic activities were conducted inside the classroom, and online through a dedicated Google Group.

a) interrelations between language proficiency and chosen themes

In this course, titled *XY and myself*, participants were asked to choose a theme of their interest. The 15 chosen themes were as shown in table 1:

Report	Title in Japanese	Translated Title
1	ゲンダイアートと私	Modern art and Myself
2	ドラムと私	Drum and Myself
3	バスケットボールと私	Basketball and Myself
4	日本のしと私	Japanese poetry and Myself
5	ストーリーを書くことと私	Writing story and Myself
6	ファッションと私	Fashion and Myself
7	私の猫と私	My cat and Myself
8	星を見ることと私	Watching stars and Myself
9	描くことと私	Drawing and Myself
10	ロックの反抗と私	Resistance rock and Myself
11	ゆびわものがたりと私	<i>Lord of the Rings</i> and Myself
12	パリのルブルビじゅつかんと私	Louvre of Paris and Myself
13	ハリーポッターと私	<i>Harry Potter</i> and Myself
14	空手と私	Karate and Myself
15	だいにじせかいたいせんと私	World War II and Myself

Table 1: Student themes for ARZ course

None of the participants refrained from choosing their favourite theme because of their scarce language competency, demonstrating that language proficiency has no influence on what a person genuinely considers worth of discussion or interest. Furthermore, I supervised Bartolommeoni M.A. thesis (2017) which gave evidence of how the grammatical items students need to express their thoughts, not necessarily match with the level-order presented in textbooks, based on items sequence too often decided by native language speakers only.

b) changing awareness toward own and others' values

In the fifteen meetings ARZ course, beginners had to face the reasons of their choices, dialoguing with others, while looking for the best way to ask others the reasons of their choices too. The mutual engagement helped all participants to overcome shyness in opening themselves to what we can define as a 'personal-intercultural exchange', along Holliday definition of 'small-culture' (Holliday, 1999), Byram's concept of 'intercultural encounter' (Byram et al., 2009), and Hosokawa's 'individual-culture' (*ko no bunka*; Hosokawa,2002).

As of Figure 1, Student A highlighted how the dialoguing process was helpful in understanding "deeply" what he/she has chosen to talk and write about, and how perceiving 'drum' as 'obviously part of himself' was the reason for finding difficult to explain his relationship with music. The problem to be solved was clearly not a linguistic proficiency, but a content to convey, whatever language he would use

<p>いけん 意見をもらって 考えたこと</p>	<p>この対話のおかげで、私はしみじみと私のテーマをわかりました。そして私の観念は変わりませんでした。私と音楽の関係は説明するのが難しいです、でも私にとって当たり前です、音楽は私の一部からです。ドラムは私の一部です、そして叩くことは私を生き生きと感ぜさせる。</p>
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えら 選びます scegliere ほかがつき 他楽器 altri strumenti ころ 試みる
provare あと 後 dopo く 奇しき misterioso がつき 楽器 strumento

Figure 1: Understanding my drum passion (Student A)

“Thanks to this dialoguing I could understand deeply my own theme. I didn't change my ideas. It was difficult to explain my relationship with music, but it is obvious to me. Because music is part of myself. The drum is a part of myself, and playing it makes me alive”. (Student A. Comment on the course, Japanese to English, my Translation)

結論

このアクションゼロの作品は反省に根ざします。キーワードがあります、そしてキーワードはこの反省の主なポイントを表します。最初のキーワードはリズムです、これは私と世界の接続からです、リズムのおかげで私は調和を見つけます。二番目のキーワードは感情です、音楽の心は感情からです、メンバーが感じる気持ちです、そして音楽を通じて与えられた感情です。いうまでもなく、三番目はドラムです、私の楽器からです、それからこの大きい反省の出発点からです。

このプロジェクトのおかげで、私は自分のテーマについて考えます、はじめに私はテーマを簡単だと考えました、次にテーマを深く調べました、だから私はテーマについて多くのことをわかりました、しかし、なによりも自分について多くのことをわかりました。ドラムについて考えはありました、でも、いま今私と私の楽器の関係を深く理解しています。リズムと世界の間について話して、考えました。そして私と私のいとこを比較しました、これも私を手伝いました。最後に、私の考えは変わりませんでした、観念は同じからです。前にこの観念はわかりませんでした、そしてこの探査の後に自分自身をもっとはつきりと見ます。

このアクションゼロの作品は反省に根ざします。キーワードがあります、そしてキーワードはこの反省の主なポイントを表します。最初のキーワードはリズムです、これは私と世界の接続からです、リズムのおかげで私は調和を見つけます。二番目のキーワードは感情です、音楽の心は感情からです、メンバーが感じる気持ちです、そして音楽を通じて与えられた感情です。いうまでもなく、三番目はドラムです、私の楽器からです、それからこの大きい反省の出発点からです。

“My Action Zero work roots on reflections. Has keywords. And these keywords display those reflections. The first keyword is rhythm. This is my connection with the world. I find peace thanks to the rhythm. The second is feeling. The soul of music is feeling, the feelings of the members, and the feelings felt through the music. Needless to say, the third keyword is drum. Because it is my instrument, and it was the starting point of such big reflection.

Thanks to this project I think about my theme. At first, I thought it was a simple one. Then I researched more. In so doing I could understand more about my theme. But most of all, I could understand a lot about myself. I had thoughts about drum, but now I can understand more about my relationship with my instrument. I dialogued and reflected upon the relationship between the rhythm and the world. I confronted myself with my cousin, and this helped me a lot. My thoughts didn't change, and my ideas are the same. But before [of this course] I didn't know my own ideas, and after this research I see myself

Figure 2a & 2b: Student A 'Conclusions'

In Figure 2a and 2b, the process of discovering the reasons for choosing 'drum' as theme to write and dialogue about, activated a self-understanding and helped to 'know his own ideas', questioning them and, in so doing, taking responsibility for his own choices.

c) relationship with peer-facilitators

Tutors in ARZ project were not yet named 'facilitators', nor were they all peers. While supporting students' dialogic activities, they were considered at first only 'grammar living-dictionaries', but lastly became friends (Arleoni, 2017). It is worth to note that the four tutors-facilitators were not participating in writing their own reports, and only two out of four had previously experienced such a course. They were selected upon their willingness to participate in such experimental method, and to teach Japanese in high schools or privately. Due to her previous experience in such course, T1 was extremely supportive but had to leave for a job after the first intensive week, leaving her student group to be helped by a newcomer T2. T3, used to be tutor for traditional top-down textbook language teaching, had been skeptic till the end of the course, T4 was skeptical at the beginning, but facing the impressive results, decided to write a M.A about the ARZ. T5, had no experience of the course and due to her fluency in Japanese Language felt more walking-dictionary with her group.

We can get evidence on how the relation between tutor/facilitators have been empowering through students and facilitators reports (figure 3: "I would never have thought I could write such long report, nor that I would have been able to talk about this subject in Japanese" (S3). '[Acting as tutor in this course gave me] a little more confidence in Japanese, [now] I am not afraid of not being able to support someone who asks me, which I had 100% in Japanese before (Arleoni, 2017, p. 59).



こんにちは、ジュリアと申します。トトログループのチューターです。
ヴェネツィア・カ・フォスカリ大学大学院の2年生で、日本語を勉強しています。
ジェノヴァから来ましたが、今はヴェネツィアに住んでいます。
私の興味は言語学習と空想世界です。一番好きなことは旅行するのです。
修士論文を書くためにこのワークショップに参加したが、素晴らしい経験になりました。

“Hi, I am Giulia, a facilitator. I participated in this workshop because of my Master Thesis, **but** it come out a wonderful experience!” (T4)
(Tutor 4. Online reports booklet presentation., Japanese to English, my translation)

Figure 3a & 3b: Tutor 4's surprise in the outcomes of her experience participating to dialogic classes

Case 2: Undergraduate 3rd Year (a.a. 2018/19)

The first classes for the undergraduate Japanese Language and Culture course in 2018 registered a total number of over 60 students, while 48 eventually completed the activity. Together with students, 13 facilitators were involved: 6 of them were interns for the "No-Level Brick Transformative Language Learning" project funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Mariotti PI). Among facilitators, 3 had partial experience of the course concept; the remaining 6 facilitators were experienced volunteers, and 1 was a non-experienced assistant. Those who had no previous practical experience of the course were invited to write their own report, which is understood not only as an individual but also as a collective process in the moment it is asked to present their thoughts to the other participants. Interaction would have been carried out not only firsthand in class, but also through Moodle online platform. The course would result in 18 ECTS as part of the undergraduate degree in Japanese Language and Culture.

a) interrelations between language proficiency and chosen themes

For the undergraduate course of the 3rd Year, I suggested to freely choose a theme, adding the subtitle “My future”. Most of the 60 students were scared about thinking about their future while even if already at the last year of their undergraduate course, very few had already in mind what they were willing to do after graduation. Almost all of them lamented that it was difficult to explain their dreams and feelings, as well as their projects in Japanese, but at the end of the course, they admitted that difficulty was not about the language used for this activity but about the content itself.

1. "My Future: Study in Japan and find my way "
 2. "My Future: Another day, different feelings- toward satisfaction"
 3. "My Future: Hawaii's Dream"
 4. "My Future: Every year my feelings change thanks to art"
 5. "My Future: Following translation"
 6. " My Future: Light: writing for freedom"
 7. "My Future: What should we do to live satisfactorily?"
 8. "Know Your Home, Know Yourself" "My Future"
 9. "My Future: My Relationship with Art"
 10. "My Future: New journey, new knowledge"
 11. " My Future: Understanding Cultural Diversity"
 12. "My future: teachers using interdisciplinary methods»
- (... up to 51)

Figure 4: Samples from A.Y. 2018/19 report titles

As in case study 1, language proficiency did not refrain students from choosing abstract themes inquiring the meaning of their life and choices (Figure 4); rather they become aware and responsible of their choices through the dialogic process inside and out-side of the classroom.

b) changing awareness toward own and others' values

<p>アニエセと話した時「本当に大切なことは私 がわかることだったら、どうして翻訳したい ですか。」ということを考えました。その考 えのおかげで「やはり私のためだけではな い」ということをわかりました。つまり、好 きな仕事をしたら、そしてその仕事は少しだ けも人々に役に立ったら、本当に嬉しいて す。</p>	<p>When I talked to Agnese, I asked myself: "If what's important to me is to understand, <i>why</i> do I want to translate?". Thanks to that thought, I understood that "it's not really about me only". In other words, if I do a job I like, and that job can help others even just a little bit, then I'll be happy. (S4) (Student 4 comments on the course, Japanese to English, my translation)</p>
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Figure 5: Dialoguing to reflect upon our choices

As of Figure 5, student S4, passionate for translating Japanese novel from into Italian, discovers that her passion was not just about translating in itself but about helping others offering them the possibility to enjoy a genre of literature not yet reachable to non- Japanese speakers.

The same awareness about owns emotions and dreams, was reached by S5:

"I realized it was important the dialogue we had in class too. At the beginning I didn't think so. [...] I never had such an experience. [...] My awareness about my future changed during the course [...]. When talking about the change in my future projects, I become more confident. Not a generic confidence but I was confident about my dream about the future." (S5)

c) relationship with peer-facilitators

The role of facilitators, as experienced peers or native speaker guests helping to activate the maieutic process to “stimulate students to question themselves and explore the target language” in 2018 undergraduate course, has been analysed by Ligabue (2019) and Alessandrini (2020). I want to highlight here how actually, not only the facilitators, but rather the dynamic developing internally to the whole group, was considered by students a main activating process of self and other discovery.

My group pulled me out of my comfort zone. (S6)

It was not easy to find the right words to explain myself. [...] I didn't want to open me up, but I finally was able to understand what I wanted and why. [...] It was easy to talk to my group members. [...] When finally, I choose to open that drawer, I could find more self-confidence. (S7)

So, I became nervous and thought, ‘I can't do that’. I wasn't very confident because I didn't think I was good at Japanese, but thanks to the members of the group, I got out of my comfort zone. Everyone was really kind and always helped positively and it was easy. So, I was able to speak in Japanese without worrying about being wrong I think this is a very interesting and useful experience. The reason is that I was able to grow personally by comparing with people, writing my own motives, and dialoguing with them. (S6)

Thank you Kyoshikai members! I loved your comments and enjoyed the process! (S8 comments on the course, Japanese to English, my translation)

A strong difference in students' motivation between the case study 1 and case study 2 undergraduate course, was due to the mandatory character of the latter. Students had to write the report and follow the syllabus in order to obtain marks and credits. At the beginning of the course, while participation in the case study 1 was supported solely by the students will and pleasure to widen their language competence, for participants in case study 2 attending the course was a need and a duty to completing their university career. Still, some of them indeed got passionate about the process thanks to the relationship they could develop with facilitators. A key factor in relating to the in-class process and change of power-balance, may be seen in that non-experienced facilitators “supported the dialogic teaching and learning by being involved in both teaching and learning as active participants” (Kojima, 2020). Power relationship then divert from the axis of language proficiency or from the grading teacher-student axis, empowering students with the freedom, as well the responsibility, to feel as a whole person capable of concentrate on the contents they wanted to convey, instead of feeling a lack of thinking power because of their ‘insufficient’ language proficiency.

“Since the only limitation was the number of Japanese characters, I could freely talk about my dreams and I was happy. Furthermore, reading classmate motivational text was extremely interesting. [...] Writing the motivational text was very important to me. Not only for my Japanese, but because reading the projects and aspiration of friends was an encouraging experience, and that personally was the most pleasurable activity.” (S9)

“I could see my dreams and goals from other perspectives with the advice, questions and opinions of my classmates in the classroom, I could consider what I didn't think about and to review and deepen my interests. [...] Of course, we need old traditions to understand culture, but today we may have been influenced by foreign countries, so it is more important to study the traditions born from those influences. I would not write this after my dialogue, I would have never thought of it. [...] I wrote that "comparing with others is really important for self-consciousness. Things can be found on the contrary." If you want to describe this course, I might say that. This is because the comparison between classmates and conversation partners has deepened the awareness about their dreams. When I compare my dreams with someone else's dreams, for some reason I increase my awareness about the dream I had”. (S10)

Case study 3: Graduate 2nd Year (A. Y. 2019/20)

The 2019 graduate course in Japanese Language and Culture, had 20 initial attending M.A. students, and one first year B.A. student as a temporary guest. After 3 weeks (3 classes), students who were attending “to exercise the Japanese Language before leaving for an overseas exchange period”, and two students who did not feel comfortable with the active participation method, dropped out. The class was finally composed by 11 active students, 1 B.A. and 7 facilitators. Facilitators were 1 Post Doctoral fellow, 1 volunteering M.A. Facilitator, 2 M.A. students in Foreign Language Education, 1 M.A. first year student in Japanese Language and Culture, 1 Korean Language Expert, 1 B.A. third year student. They were all experienced the method in the past, except Post-Doc and one M.A. students in Foreign Language Education. in the method. All student-facilitators were volunteering. The course output meant to be an oral presentation and one individual report, to be evaluated by peers (40%) and teacher (60%), and one final group report collection (no marks). Classes were conducted in classroom and online through Moodle platform.

a) interrelations between language proficiency and chosen themes

As for case study 1 and case study 2, M.A. students too did not refrain themselves from choosing a significant theme to write and discuss in Japanese. 5 out of 11 students had not actually yet passed the M.A. first year exams of Japanese Language, but still were willing to attend the class and enjoyed the transformative-critical pedagogy backing the method. meetings were recorded, avoiding two students who did not agreed to record research data. Students could change the initial report title, if they wanted, at the end of the course. Delivered students' final titles are as of Figure 6.

1. "Sightseeing and Stereotype"
2. "Dante into Japanese literature, and me"
3. "Visual System and Internationalization, Statelessness, Omnivores"
4. "My intuitive world-beauty and convenience of intent"
5. "Web novels and me" "Web novels and two critiques"
6. "The hidden value of tea - My interests and Japanese studies"
7. "A word that conveys pleasure. The relationship between telecommunications and translation- Toward my research theme"
8. "Relationship between youkai and folklore and society and language - Toward my research theme"
9. "Use of New Religion Anime and Manga- Toward my research theme"
10. "Gender Society and I"
11. "Toward a critical approach to the relationship between abortion and religion. —

Figure 6: M.A. 2019 course: Students' final report titles

b) changing awareness toward own and others' values

As the first two case studies, in-class, online and outside the classroom activities, guided students to reach awareness about their themes choice, and furthermore about the choice to actively participate, question and engage in dialoguing with peers and facilitators, as well as in establishing the criteria most relevant to them to be evaluated upon, and in evaluating each other.

I am happy I could write about this theme [*manga* are usually disregarded](S11)

I [finally] found the courage to ask explanations to my classmate. (S12)

While quite lost at the very beginning, due to absence of textbooks or manuals, students felt empowered by their own willingness to challenge and convey in Japanese thoughts and ideas most relevant to them.

I never wrote an essay like this one before, so I didn't know what to do. That's why it took so long to write a motivation statement. After writing and re-writing, it, I tried to have a more consistent dialogue. Talking about tea, why it's important to me, and about tea ceremony. I was finally unable to have meaningful dialogue because there always were other interesting topics, but not actually very useful for my purpose. Anyway, just after the dialogue activity, I was able to understand the purpose of this report, thanks to the teachers.

The motivation statement title I chose at the beginning was "the four concepts of tea ceremony". I thought it was a way for me to tell everyone what was important to me. Therefore, the purpose of the dialogue was to find out how to make others understand that tea is important. I thought the tea ceremony was the perfect way to explain it. But after the dialogue, others were asked the question, "Why is tea important to her?" Thanks to that [seeing myself through others], I thought about my subject again. In the end, I think tea is a way to recognize yourself.

In other words, if I could tell others the importance of tea, I would probably be able to understand my habits and my feelings. And after thinking, I thought it was better to choose a more personal title. That's why I wrote the title "The hidden value of tea". [...] When I talked to C. about those feelings and the feelings of exclusion, I was so happy that I realized that this was the topic I was really interested in. I always drink tea during breaks, so I feel that it has been excluded. I can't take a quick break without drinking coffee. Then in such cases I usually drink nothing. Of course, this is a small case of exclusion, but I am often uncomfortable in everyday situations. For a shy person like me this can be very hard. But I think everyone has a feeling of exclusion from time to time. [...] because of exclusion, some people lose value or lose confidence. [...] I think emotions like communication, collaboration and exclusion are related. [...] Still, this topic is very broad and involves a variety of situations. For example, separation and oppression are issues based on exclusion. Unfortunately, I didn't talk well about this topic because I thought the above exclusion story had little to do with the tea ceremony and the four concepts [I wanted to write about]. [...] I thought this was very interesting, and this report made me think about myself and was able to compare each other with many different people. I did not do this alone, so I taught how to cooperate as a team. And I think this activity has helped me become more open. (S 13. comment on the course, Japanese to English, my translation)

c) relationship with peer-facilitators

As in case study 2, while still having the role of experienced guiding peers, once participating in writing their own reports, and engaging in dialoguing activity, become a more 'reachable' and less frightening presence, especially when showing their weakness in the foreign language (Italian or Japanese), and sharing their motivation underlying their own report:

I have to say Mariotti's project was a very difficult experience for me. I feel that in this course was the worst student. In fact, I was not excited to participate in a course where I would be in front of my peers. Also, two years ago, I participated in a similar activity by prof. Hosokawa, but I had not completed. The activities I did in and out of class gave to students the opportunity to look back on how we had selected a research theme. Universities may not always apply our freedoms, but this course did. Through classroom activities, I opened up a bit with my previously unfamiliar classmates and at the same time listened to their experiences. I talked about my interests, and at the same time, I spoke Japanese with Japanese students. I saw the facilitators as something that made us feel frustrated. In my opinion, facilitators helped us in many cases, but I think it influenced our work. We students always face anxiety over professors' judgment and the fear of not being able to be understood by others. It took time to speak naturally with T and C, because I was worried to make some mistakes. On the other hand, for them nothing was risky. Only after the dialogue part, I really considered them members of the group. Perhaps the fear of failing and being judged inappropriate for the course has influenced my participation. There were many things that were difficult to study at the deadlines, but I had an

interesting experience. I guess I've done what I could, and I feel I've done a good job. (S14 Comment on the course, Japanese to English , my translation)

	2016 zero beginners	2018 B.A., 3rd year	2019 M.A., 2nd year
Students	15	60 > 48	20 + 1 guest >> 11
Facilitators (native & non native)	4 (5) (3 M.A., 1 extern, 1 experienced post M.A) No Facilitators reports	13 (6 interns [3 semi-experienced], 6 experienced volunteers, 1 non ex. Assistant) Report required for non-experienced	7 (6 volunteers [1 Assistant, 3 M.A., 1 B.A., 1 Korean Expert], 1 PD non experienced) Report required for non-experienced
output	Presentation + report + report collection	Presentation + report (individual)	Presentation + report + report collection
credits	3 internship credits upon request (no marks)	18 CFU (partial marks); mandatory	18 CFU (partial marks); mandatory
method	Class & Google Groups	Class & Moodle	Class & Moodle

Table 2: The three case studies at a glance.

6. Findings and conclusions

The UNESCO report 2005 underlined the contemporary shift from an information society to a knowledge society, aiming at developing literacy for a lifelong learning and critical understanding necessary to act responsibly in democratic societies. IT and Artificial Intelligence surely help in mechanical translations from and into languages, and, together with increasing overseas mobility programs, suggest and support a new role of foreign language teachers for the so called next generations Z and Alpha (Mariotti 2017).

The playground is ready to welcome the actual reality: multi-level foreign language classrooms are our present but, due to a hierarchical proficiency level standard that see a native-like proficiency as the only desirable aim, they are still considered a problem to face, instead than a chance to take advantage from. Above data showed that focusing on what students have already (their ideas and thoughts), and on the necessary practice of self-questioning, applied to learners as well as teachers, can empower subalterns to find the words and courage to freely express themselves and responsibly contribute to their/our present intercultural societies, becoming aware of our/their historical positionality.

Questioning (inventorying) our own actions and thoughts to encounter and welcoming others is not an easy process. Challenging our own beliefs is as much needed as

harder than asking for easy instruction and textbooks. Foreign language classes can offer an open space to enjoy the process of expressing own thoughts through others, if only the dividing walls of proficiency levels can be overcome. It is not an easy challenge, since it means to give up the power of nativism myth.

The three case studies, Zero-beginners, B.A., M.A., as well as Facilitators, despite participating into a Language Class, welcomed the free theme active learning transformative method, mutually becoming aware of their possibility and capacity of overcome fearfulness of judgment thanks to the theme they had chosen and to the relationship with peers and facilitators. No matter the level, they did accept responsibility in choosing the theme they cared about. No matter the level, they engaged in asking to others, looking for understanding or helping others understanding what they wanted to say.

The showcases suggests the need for a de-standardized transformative-critical language education, where teachers and learners are seen as subjects of a reciprocally empowering process, not by chance, as existing multi-level classes may suggest, but on purpose. The medium-language is no more just a tool, but builds the message itself: “If it were not in Japanese, I would not becoming aware of my thoughts like I did” (S14, M.A. 2019).

Misalignments between postmodernism purposes of democratic social cohesion and modernistic hierarchical linear teaching-learning are often observable, and concerning. More has to be studied about the effects of the modernist level-based assumption and a no-level FLE model (NoLBrick), to opens new horizons for a de-standardising of teaching, learning and evaluation.

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