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Power Relation and Transformation of Agency in the Second Language Acquisition Process of a Foreign Resident in Japan: From the Sociocultural Approach

Emi KAWABATA

1. Introduction

According to the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2017, the number of Japanese language learners enrolled in Japanese language schools and universities was 239,597, which was less than 10% of the total number of foreign residents in Japan. However, Japanese language education research has focused on international students at institutions of higher education and on children with foreign backgrounds. According to the same report, they pointed out that some foreign workers and married foreign residents living in Japan lacked opportunities to attend Japanese language classes and had little contact with Japanese people or the Japanese community, which prevented their ability to learn Japanese. Such problems related to language use by foreign residents in Japan for the purpose of employment, marriage, etc., are influenced by social issues different from those of Japanese language learners studying at Japanese language schools and educational institutions. Norton (2000) pointed out that influential factors of foreign residents' language acquisition were related to the power relations they had to negotiate in their social interactions in their community and their marginalized position as immigrants, and the power relations were inherent in the language acquisition process. The power relations exist in the case of foreign residents living in Japan and how they affect language acquisition remain unknown.

The purpose of this study is to clarify language acquisition problems and power relations surrounding foreign residents who came to Japan for purposes other than studying, such as employment or marriage etc. I used the sociocultural approach, which was influenced by poststructuralism, which attempts to view language learners from a social perspective. The sociocultural approach has become mainstream since 1990 (Norton & Thooy, 2002; Block, 2007; 2013). In addition, I focused on agency in the process of language acquisition, and this study aimed to describe how their agency changes as they acquire Japanese as a second language¹.

¹ In this paper, "second language" and "second language acquisition" refer to the acquisition of languages other than the first language in second language acquisition research. The survey participant in this study acquired his first language, Nepalese,

There is little research on foreign residents who have come to Japan for work, marriage or other reasons, and the details of their Japanese language acquisition process and the sociocultural context that hinder their acquisition are not well understood. This research will help to clarify the aspects of language use of the increasing number of foreign residents in Japan today, as well as the background factors that inhibit language use, and consider education that meets the needs of these people in future Japanese language education research. The research questions are as follows: (1) What kind of language-related life problems does one foreign resident face and what factors contribute to these problems? (2) How does agency for one foreign resident change over the process of language acquisition?

2. Literature Review: Sociocultural Approach

In second language acquisition research, from the 1990s, the sociocultural approach, which focuses on the sociocultural aspects of language acquisition, became the mainstream, influenced by post-structuralism. In particular, the identity approach, which is one of the sociocultural approaches centered on Norton (2000), is a concept that seeks to understand how power relations in society affect language acquisition and how the language acquisition process is transformed by the learner's identity, in the process of language learners participating in the target language community and acquiring the language. The survey by Norton found that some immigrant women who had moved to Canada were unable to participate in a community due to categories such as the gender, race, ethnicity and class of the learners, and were unable to engage with the target language community because they were not given the "right to speak" (Bourdieu, 1977) by the target language speakers of the community. Norton also referred to the motivation to actively engage in language learning as "investment", and the symbolic and material resources gained because of repeated investment as "cultural capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), explained that by acquiring cultural capital, one can simultaneously acquire the right to speak. The research by Norton was a pioneering study that examined the interrelationship between the learning environment and the motivation of learners. Research that examined the language acquisition process of learners from a post-structuralist perspective has been conducted in various countries and learning environments. McKay and Wong (1996) investigated experiences of Chinese immigrant students in American junior high school, and Segal (1996) investigated Western women learning Japanese. In Xu (2011), Chinese English learners living in Australia felt that they were treated unfairly in their host country because they were non-native speakers and were unable to demonstrate their true language performance. He clarified how power relationships affect social interaction between second language learners and target language speakers. In the Japanese context, there are studies such as Hayashi (2018), which investigated attitudes, use and language learning of Vietnamese refugees in Japan, and Fukihara (2021), which investigated Japanese language acquisition process of Indonesian

and his second and third languages and Japanese is his fourth language. Here, in accordance with the definition of second language, languages other than the first language, including Japanese, were expressed as second languages.

resident workers living in rural areas. Fukihara cited external factors such as the lack of opportunities to use Japanese due to the presence of intermediaries such as networks between Indonesian resident workers and interpreters, as well as internal factors such as a psychological sense of distance towards Japan and Japanese culture, as factors that inhibit the acquisition of Japanese by Indonesian resident workers. Regarding internal factors, he pointed out the possibility that they may feel shame or fear about speaking Japanese due to things like making mistakes at work or being ridiculed by Japanese people at work, citing “language shock” (Schumann, 1978). On the other hand, there are not many Japanese studies that take a sociocultural approach to the language acquisition process of adult foreign residents, and there are some parts of the social context and language acquisition process of learners who have come to Japan for work or marriage that are not well understood. Norton and McKinney (2011) pointed out that second language acquisition researchers need to know how social power relations operate when language learners access target language groups.

3. Theoretical frameworks: Agency

The Agency in language learning is defined by Ahearn (2001, p.112) as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” and by Duff (2012, p.417) as “people’s ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation”. Although there is no fixed definition of agency, we could understand it to be a general term for the selection and coordination of learners’ learning in the language acquisition process, as well as the actions and changes that affect individuals and society. Duranti (2005) identified three stages of the process of acquiring agency in the language acquisition process: (1) have some degree of control over their own behavior, (2) whose actions in the world affect other entities’ (and sometimes their own), and (3) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome). In this study, I used his three stages to gain a detailed understanding of the agency of language learners.

As second language acquisition research suggests that learners become passive in their learning when they lose their agency, the key to successful language acquisition here is how agency is acquired and maintained. Miller (2014) argued that being “powerless” in a society was not equivalent to a lack of “agency,” using adult immigrants as an example and by pinpointing the reasons for the low agency of learners, it is possible to clarify the unequal social and cultural context in which adult immigrants are placed.

4. Method

4.1 Research Procedures

The collaborator for this survey is Mr. Mahato (pseudonym). He is a Nepalese male. I met him at an evening junior high school class², where I had been conducting field research for about a year and invited him to cooperate in this survey. I interviewed him 2 times in September 2022 (1st interview time: 58 minutes, 2nd interview time: 3 hours and 45 minutes). I used the semi-structured interview. We used Japanese within the interviews. On the day of the first interview, I prepared a consent form with an explanation of research ethics and obtained his consent, confirming the content with him verbally and on paper. I recorded the content of the interview using an audio recorder and field notes with his consent.

In the next section, based on the data obtained from the interviews, we discuss his employment in 5.1 and evening junior high school in 5.2, according to his two characteristic turning points. The transcription conventions as follows: Mahato: Ma, Me (the author):*, sentence omissions: [...], and supplements that I added: ()

Participant profile

Mahato was born in a small village in Baglung³, located in central Nepal. He is the eldest of three brothers in his family with father, mother, and grandmother. From an early age, he actively helped his mother and grandmother and took care of his two younger brothers. As he described himself as “sociable” in his essay at the evening junior high school, he is active in speaking up in class and communicating actively with other students. His native language is Nepali, and he also speaks English and Hindi. Before coming to Japan, he had never studied Japanese, and he began to learn Japanese at the evening junior high school one year after coming to Japan.

4.2 Life Story Research

In this study, I conducted research in line with the approach of life story research. The life story research focuses on the narratives of individuals’ lives and experiences. The life story research is a story in which the speaker’s story of the past “then and there” is constructed in the “here and now” through the interaction between speaker and listener. This is called the “dialogical constructionist approach” (Sakurai, 2002), which aims to

² Evening junior high schools are public educational institutions where those 15 years of age or older who for some reason were unable to complete their compulsory education can reenter secondary education. Currently, approximately 60% of the students attending evening junior high schools are non-Japanese nationals, so many of them offer Japanese language learning in addition to other subjects.

³ It is one of the districts in Dhawalagiri Zone, located west of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal.

understand the narrative from the perspective of not only what was told in a story, but also how it was told, to get at subjective construction of the speaker's social reality (Miyo, 2015).

4.3 Narrative analysis

In the data analysis, I used narrative analysis as proposed by Polkinghorne (1995). Narrative analysis is characterized by the fact that it constructs a single story by plotting the spoken narrative as it is. The procedure of narrative analysis involves transcribing all the data and then connecting the transcribed narratives chronologically in the form of a plot.

In the data analysis, there was a possibility that the author's interpretation would be included when translating scripts from Japanese to English. I made translate the content spoken by the collaborators as much as possible.

5. Data analysis

Mahto's father had worked as a chef in India, Qatar, and Dubai during Mahto's childhood to make a living for the family. When Mahto's father started working in Japan as a chef in a restaurant, Mahato decided to stay in Japan with his parents for about two months when he was 17 years old. Mahato was a student at a high school in Nepal, and when his family decided to go to Japan, he felt that he would have to "lose many things," including the life he had built up in Nepal, his grandmother, and his relationships with friends. He said he was particularly anxious about the language usage, as he said that "language is the most important thing" when living abroad and "One concern I had was the language." about his image of Japan before he came to Japan.

However, after his arrival in Japan, his parents suddenly decided to live in Japan for a long period of time, and he had to stay in Japan. Then, when Mahato was 17 years old, he left high school in Nepal and wanted to transfer to a Japanese high school. However, even though he had graduated from junior high school in Nepal, he was refused admission into the mainstream Japanese education because primary and first semester secondary education in Nepal lasted a total of eight years and he could not speak Japanese at the time. For him, who had wanted to go and graduate a high school, and university would have meant the "end of my life," as he would have been over 30 years old. In addition, he could no longer transfer to high school and so, he would not be able to do anything for a while. His father was a cook in a restaurant and her mother helped him, so his parents had to be away from home during days. Also, his two younger brothers had not yet arrived in Japan from Nepal, so he spent most of his time at home alone. His father was living in a foreign country and earning money for his

schooling., and Mahato expressed his gratitude to his father, saying, “Thank you for working so that we can go to school,” but he also said, “I don’t understand the language, the food doesn’t fit, I have no friends,” and “it was a completely different world from the one I was in”. He talked that he was not able to be admitted into high school and was forced to live a life different from that of his parents, and that it was a time of great hardship and “uncertainty” about his future life in Japan.

5.1 Employment

At the same time, he felt sad about his current situation and decided that he had to take some action to make things better. He began working part-time as an appliance maintenance worker through an acquaintance of his father’s. About his first part-time job in Japan, he said that he had no previous experience learning Japanese and that all his colleagues and supervisors were Japanese, which made communication in Japanese at work very difficult. For example, he could not understand instructions from his colleagues and supervisors, so he had to “guess” what they would say, and when they announced a raise for part-time workers at work, he could not understand “why everyone’s faced lit up” because he did not understand the Japanese word for “wage”. For the first few months of his part-time job, he always felt “I was anxious the whole time I was working.”.

[Story #1] *: Were there any scenes where you had the most trouble because you could not speak Japanese?

Ma: I was most frustrated when I could not say, “I can do it” what I can do. For example, it may be true that I could not speak honestly, but I can say, “I can do this,” if I understand Japanese. If I don’t understand Japanese, I cannot say it. For other persons, they had an image that I was not able to do either.

Mahato said that even when he was technically “able” to do something, he was “most frustrated” that his colleagues regarded him as “not able” because he could not speak Japanese, and that he was evaluated as “not able”. In addition, because he could not communicate in Japanese that he wanted to take a break when he was not feeling well, he had to work “patiently”. He also talked that when he volunteered to go to a job site to work in pairs, “everyone gave me disapproving looks,” and there were atmospheres of “you can’t do it,” when he said, “I’m going to the site”. Although his part-time colleagues were usually kind to him, but he felt that “I had to work hard even if they were kind to me”, and that he had to feel a sense of responsibility for his work in addition to his relationships with them. Furthermore, because he did not understand the Japanese spoken by his colleagues and superiors, he gradually began to distance himself from them, such as when he stopped going to drinking parties that he had gone to at first because he thought the parties were “meaningless”.

[Story #2] **Ma:** For example, when they were asked to “get this,” I could not understand the words, so they acted as if it was faster to go and get it themselves than to leave it to me. Also, for example, when I wanted to say to someone, “Here it is,” or “Please go get it,” but they could not understand the words that I said, it was faster for me to go get it myself than for them to leave it. [...] I realized that it was impossible without Japanese language skills.

Since Mahato did not know how to speak even the simple Japanese used when asking someone to pick up something for him, he sometimes went to pick up things himself, or his colleagues would go to pick up things themselves. On the other hand, he realized the necessity of learning Japanese when he avoided even simple communications with his colleagues and, conversely, when he was avoided by his colleagues. Furthermore, he said that the attitude of his colleagues, which he experienced when working in pairs, was the catalyst for his own desire to “grow up”.

5.2 Evening junior high school

Then Mahato decided to attend a local Japanese language class. However, since the class was held only once a week, his motivation did not last long, and he quit the Japanese language class after one month. Then his Nepalese friend told him about a “proper school-like” evening junior high school with textbooks and academic subjects as English and science, and he began attending. When he first enrolled in the evening junior high school, he was given strict instructions on hiragana and katakana, which he had been writing in proper stroke order, and he struggled to keep up with the class. On the other hand, his teachers at school taught him carefully, for example, by writing hiragana on kanji, using a smartphone or computer to show pictures of difficult-to-explain items, and drawing pictures on whiteboard to explain things in an easy-to-understand way. Furthermore, when it was time to go to school, students in the same classroom called him every day to ask him, “Are you coming (to school)?” or “I have to get a train soon,” and he would often come to school. Many of the students from Nepal work as hotel bed-makers or in food processing in factories, and they went straight to school after work. When he wanted to take a day off from school, he asked himself, “Am I doing it wrong?” He was not able to attend the local Japanese language class for long, but he was able to continue attending the evening junior high school. He described his personal change after attending the school as follows.

[Story #3] **Ma:** The first thing that has changed in my life is, of course, that I understand the language. Once I understood the language, I was able to do a wide range of things, but the first thing is that I was able to live and work better. I am able to communicate better. I came to understand what the

other person was saying. [...] And the biggest change was like, “They understand my Japanese,” “Then they can entrust me with this kind of thing,” and “I can already understand with other person,” and they try talk to me.

The Japanese language he learned at the school was especially “useful” in his life and especially work. By being able to communicate smoothly at work, he was able to build a relationship with his colleagues and superiors and they started entrusting him with their jobs, and they began to talk to him, and he started going to drinking parties again, which he stopped go to before because it was “meaningless. In addition, he said that he is now able to understand what others are saying, and that he is now able to make friends outside of the workplace because he is now able to “communicate his feelings” as well.

[Story #4] **Ma: In my situation, I learned Japanese here (at the school). And I made some friends here. I was very much loved. I studied here for several years, and the most important thing was that I can speak Japanese very well and made other friends here. [...] I was also loved by the students, including my teachers. They loved me because we worked hard together. The part where they were with me. It was like teamwork. When it becomes teamwork, it’s not about whether person is good or bad. It’s like teamwork.*: Yes. So, you study as a team rather than studying alone? Ma: Of course.**

In addition to appreciating that he was able to learn Japanese and make friends at the school. In addition to the dedicated teachers and enthusiastic students, he described process of working hard with them in his class and events as a kind of “teamwork,” a space where both sides could grow together.

Also, he talked about the changes that have taken place not only in his own life but also in those around him as a result of his ability to speak Japanese. At a cell phone store, he was denied important information because the shop staff recognized that he did not speak Japanese. Mahato had experienced this kind of response several times like “This person doesn’t speak, so it doesn’t make sense (to speak all information) “. However, after he learned Japanese, he was treated politely and realized that “language makes a big difference”.

[Story #5] *: When you thought that the store’s customer service had changed, did you think that you had improved your Japanese? **Ma: I noticed that I could communicate better.** *: Now that you can speak Japanese so well, has it made your life easier? **Ma: It makes a big difference that I can now say, “This is not” what I meant. Even if the other person is wrong, if I don’t understand the language, I can only say, “Yes,**

I understand,” no matter what they say. I could not say what I wanted to say, and I could only understand what they said “yes” and “no”. It is already much different.

In the past, when other person said something to him, he could only give a very simple response, such as yes or no. However, he added that being able to correct other person’s mistake and communicate what he wants to say has made a big difference in his daily life.

In addition, when Mahato went to a barbershop in Japan, the staff did not perform a certain procedure on him that they normally perform on customers. He recognized this as discrimination and described it as the “most frustrating” experience he had ever had in Japan. On the other hand, he talked that learning Japanese and living in Japan has changed him even more.

[Story #6] Ma: (When I am discriminated against) I would say it now (it is discrimination). But there are situations where I can say it, and there are situations where I cannot. I’ve lived here for years, I know everything. But no matter how good my Japanese is, there are times when I cannot speak anything because I’m a foreigner.

He also talked that there are cases where he may or may not be able to say if he is subjected to such discrimination, and that no matter how much he has improved his Japanese by living in Japan, he cannot resist discrimination if he is perceived as a “foreigner” or made to be a “foreigner.”

6. Discussion

Based on the analysis, I discuss the research questions set at the beginning of this paper. First, (1) What kind of language-related life problems does one foreign resident face and what factors contribute to these problems? In Mahato’s story about working life, he talked about the difficulties he had with communicating in Japanese at work, such as receiving negative evaluations, difficulties in building relationships with colleagues and superiors as well as experiences of discrimination as language-related problems. Firstly, in the concept of “legitimate discourse” put forward by Bourdieu (1977), cited by Norton, if a speaker is unable to speak in an appropriate phonetic and syntactic form, they will not be recognized as a legitimate speaker and will be excluded from communication. In fact, because Mahato was unable to speak Japanese, there were times when his opinions were not listened to, and he was excluded from communication. This oppressive atmosphere also

created the possibility that he had to avoid using Japanese and communicating. He talked about how he had distanced himself from his colleagues and superiors because he could not understand Japanese, and how he had avoided even simple Japanese communication. When using Japanese, Mahato developed a strong sense of failure. This may be the result of “fear” (Norton, 2000) that language learners feel when speaking in a communication situation, or the “language shock” (Shumann, 1978) that occurs when using the target language, which can restrict language use. In particular, fear of native speakers does not occur without a power relationship (Norton, 2000). Due to this sociocultural background, Mahato was discouraged from investing in learning Japanese, and as a result he was unable to acquire cultural capital such as Japanese language acquisition, social relationship building, and skill improvement. Norton (2000) explained that the effects of such power relations could be seen as differences in access to symbolic and material resources in everyday social encounters at the micro level as well as the macro level. In the workplace where the “right to speak” was not recognized, Mahato was not only denied the opportunity to come into contact with Japanese, but also the opportunity to come into contact with the capital needed in the society.

Furthermore, Mahato talked that he had often been treated unfairly at the cell phone shop and barbershop. He strongly felt that his experience at the barbershop was discriminatory and felt that he had been treated unfairly because he was a foreigner and could not speak Japanese. One of the participants in Xu’s (2011) survey was aware that she had a low social status because she was a non-native speaker in a host country and her social role, and she felt that she was treated unfairly. In the case of Mahato, he was also aware of his position in Japan objectively, and he recognized that he had been treated unfairly because he was a foreigner and a non-native speaker of Japanese. This kind of awareness on his part confirms the existence of power relationships. In addition, when he talked about his experience at the barbershop, he was trying to internalize discriminatory speech and behavior by thinking that the staff might have treated him differently or said discriminatory things because he was a “foreigner”. In this situation, where he was made to strongly recognize himself as a “foreigner” in relation to “Japanese people” and to internalize discriminatory speech, there was a possibility that the power relationships were made invisible to the person concerned, as well as the internalization of structural power relationships such as “Japanese and foreigners”. There was a possibility that he had to communicate under unequal power relationships such as “Japanese and foreigner” or “native Japanese speaker and non-native Japanese speaker”, as well as the power relationship. However, because of these experiences, he has decided to invest in his Japanese language learning. According to Norton, power relationships affect the confidence of second language learners, but he has a high level of self-awareness regarding his Japanese language learning and was investing in them.

The next research question is (2) How does agency for one foreign resident change over the process of language acquisition? In this section, I discuss his process of acquiring agency in the three life-story situations [1] migration to Japan, [2] employment, and [3] evening junior high school, referring to Duranti’s (2005) three

processes of agency acquisition. First, in [1] migration to Japan, Mahato talked about the choices and behavioral restrictions in his life after coming to Japan, including transferring to high school, and seemed to lack the foundation for building agency. On the other hand, in [2] employment, the inability to communicate smoothly with his colleagues and superiors at work and the fear of learning Japanese were the reasons for the realization of the necessary for Japanese language study. The control over the behavior of learning Japanese here is considered to correspond to Duranti's acquisition process of agency (1) have some degree of control over their own behavior, and his choice and action to enroll in the evening junior high school were in fact a choice. Lastly, in [3] evening junior high school, he was a member of the "team" in the "beloved space" of his teachers and students (= (2) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own)), and he was able to work and build trusting relationships through learning Japanese. The narratives that he was able to build trusting relationships and work through Japanese language learning showed (3) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome). In addition, the narrative that the acquisition of Japanese language enabled him to resist discrimination to some extent can be seen as an achievement of agency, which Duff (2012) described as "actively resist certain behaviors, practices, or positionings". On the other hand, he mentioned that there were situations in which he could not point out when he is discriminated against. For example, the situations that appeared in the narratives by him discussed in this paper were only in a limited number of settings, such as workplace and school. Depending on the context, such as where he goes and his position, the likelihood of his being able to resist discrimination may be lower or higher. When agency is lowered depending on the context in which these parties are placed, there are power relations such as "Japanese and foreigners" as identified in Research Question 1.

7. Summary

Based on the life story of one collaborator, this paper examined aspects of language use among a foreign resident, what factors inhibit language use, and how foreign resident's agency changed with language acquisition. I found that the collaborator had to communicate under unequal power relations based on their Japanese language ability after coming to Japan. In such unequal power relations, he tried to avoid using Japanese, and it was difficult for him to acquire Japanese language skills as "cultural capital". On the other hand, his "investment" in learning Japanese was confirmed by such unequal power relations. Through such "investment," he acquired Japanese language skills and gained agency. However, as I confirmed in the previous section, agency is fluid. In future research, I will carefully observe and describe an agency of language learners to gain a better understanding of the unequal social and cultural context in which they live.

Yagi (2018), who conducted a qualitative study on learners' agency, pointed out that Japanese language educators need to be interested in the political and economic context in which Japanese language education for

foreign residents is conducted, and furthermore, to prepare a space where they can exercise agency. What will be required of Japanese language education research in the future will be to study language use by all kinds of foreign residents and the factors that inhibit language use, and at the same time, and to discuss places and spaces that facilitate learning and exercise of agency by foreign residents.

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