

# Diversity in Japanese Education

Naoko Araki (Ed.)



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## **Diversity in Japanese Education**

**CRITICAL NEW LITERACIES: THE PRAXIS OF ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING (PELT)**

Volume 5

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# **Diversity in Japanese Education**

*Edited by*

**Naoko Araki**

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## 1. INTERNATIONALIZATION OF EDUCATION: NON-*JUNJAPA*

*Transnational and Transcultural Identity*

### INTRODUCTION

Internationalization is a further complication to identity and realization of the limits to categorization. We can no longer associate ourselves within a simple categorical identity. Our identity exists as a series of reactions and feedback we receive from others such as families, teachers, and institutions. International experience allows individuals to question the need for categorization of nations or cultures. It allows us to unleash ourselves from invisible burdens or frameworks assigned since the very second of our birth. Realization of diversity through internationalization and transnationalism allows rebirth into a new existence with a wider vision and unlimited possibilities.

### GROWING UP

I was born in Yokohama, Japan, to two Japanese parents who are both artists. Until 4th grade in elementary school, I was enrolled in a private girls' Christian school where moral teachings were highly valued based on the Bible and divine services. In school, I was taught with very strict discipline to be a charming and loving lady based on religious and traditional Japanese customs: to be passive, obedient, and sophisticated. But those teachings never seemed to work for me. I was a weird kid at this strict Christian school, who always got into trouble. No matter how early I left home, random things such as plants and flowers on the street or interestingly shaped clouds distracted me and I was almost always late to school. My parents were called to school multiple times because I read novels and comic books during class. My grades were fair but never great. My grade book would always have comments like, "she has potential but she doesn't try hard enough."

As for education at home, my parents had somewhat contradictory teachings. My mother was assertive and dominating in decisions within the household. I spent most of my time with my mother at home. She taught me with strict rules and discipline; told me to become socially successful. However, she was the one who decided to send me to a private girls' Christian school instead of a more academically competitive and socially diverse public school as my little brother. I remember asking her why



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my brother and I were going to different schools, I remember her telling me that because I am a girl, she wanted me to be *yasashii* (優しい nice and kind). I realize now that her teachings seem to reflect her own conflicting feelings about women being successful at work as well as being a caring mother. My father, on the other hand, had a contradictory teaching method. I remember a day when my father was called to school because I was reading a book in class. After a meeting with my teacher, he took me to a *manga kissa*<sup>1</sup> (漫画喫茶) and told me that I should be proud to be passionate about something that I love. Years later he told me that he wanted us to nurture latent personality and potential we are born with and not to live by the expectations forced upon us by society.

When I was ten, my parents divorced and my mother, younger brother, and I moved to Seattle, Washington, for my mother to study art therapy. Although it's becoming more common nowadays, divorce is still not widely accepted in Japan. From traditional perspectives, it was unimaginable for a single mother of two children to decide to move to a foreign country to attend school. When we moved to the United States, my mother started by attending ESL courses at a local community college. Her main aim was to complete an art therapy Master's degree in the United States. We were supposed to be in Seattle for a year or two but ended up staying for over a decade, and my mother ended up earning a PhD in Psychotherapy.

When we moved to Seattle, I was thrown into a completely different school environment. In the traditional Japanese educational environment, school years are decided by the age of students, classroom's seating arrangements are always in rows facing the teacher, and students are taught to be passive and quiet. In contrast, in the U.S., the school where I went had specialized classes for ESL students. Students from different grades were assigned to classes based on their English fluency. I had older and younger classmates. Classrooms were decorated with pictures and maps of different countries, and students interacted with each other, and the teachers and students actively interacted. I remember feeling uncomfortable at first because it looked more like a kindergarten and classmates seemed less serious about learning at school than the ones I knew in Japan.

The most difficult change for me was to adjust myself into the new learning environment where I was expected to be more expressive. I was trained to be quiet, obedient, and a good listener in Japan. Classes in the United States were mostly interactive and it took me a while to be able to even try to raise my hand in class. Not only did I have to learn to speak in English, I also had to learn to speak my own thoughts in class. This was the most challenging part.

#### BECOMING AMERICAN

As the time passed, I eventually became able to enjoy the freedom and flexibility of this American education. I liked how classrooms were arranged differently depending on the classrooms and that we were able to interact more freely with classmates and teachers. The individualistic and talent-oriented education gave me different types

of learning opportunities than I would ever have had in Japan. Even though I was still in ESL, I was able to join in with older classmates for Math class. I was chosen to draw and paint on the school's front door due to my artistic talent. I still felt incompetent in English language skills but these experiences and opportunities gave me self-confidence. By the time I was in the 9th grade, I was able to join regular classes with other local English-speaking students. Even though I was still very quiet in class, I started to join class discussions and interact more with other students.

As I learned how to speak fluently in English, I felt a stronger urge to assimilate into American life style. I dressed in a certain style, hung out with local friends, and I even started to adjust my accent trying to sound as native as possible. Because I was fairly successful at it, some teachers expected that I also could write well. These expectations became a real pressure and resulted in lower grades in classes when assignments were mainly focused on writing. This negatively affected my confidence and motivation for learning. As I hit my teenage years, I became aware of myself falling into an identity crisis. I felt a gap between my Japanese tiger<sup>2</sup> mom and my American-Japanese immigrant identity. Because of my mother's strong beliefs and attachment to Japanese education, she took me to Japanese Saturday School (*hosyuukou* 補習校) every week. I studied Japanese language and followed the Japanese school curriculum using the same authorized textbooks used in schools in Japan. I felt like an outcast at the Japanese Saturday School because of my family structure, with a single mother being a fulltime student, whereas most Japanese students had both parents living with them. Their fathers often worked for a Japanese company and mothers stayed at home full-time to look after the children.

When I travelled to Japan during a holiday, I started feeling that I no longer belonged there. Japan became a foreign country to me, and at the same time I still felt excluded and challenged as an immigrant in the U.S. I also began to recognize my sexual orientation and gender identity. I felt that I simply could not "pass" any of the categories I was supposed to "fit in." I ended up quitting the Japanese Saturday School at the 10th grade and became unable to properly attend classes in high school. Making sure not to let my mother know, I skipped school quite often and just wandered around town. When I realized that I could not graduate on time, I decided to try again. With the help of a teacher and a school counselor, I found a way to receive high school credits with an alternative method. I enrolled in the Running Start program in the district where I lived. This program allowed the 11th and 12th graders to attend community college courses while they were enrolled in high school. Students were able to obtain more credits in less time. The learning environment was also different from the local high school where I used to attend. Students were expected to study individually and there was less interaction in class. I felt more comfortable being in this environment surrounded by adults than with chatty, loud, and distracting teenagers. Because of this program, I was able to graduate high school on time.

I enrolled in a local community college instead of four-year university because of my family's financial status and my bad grades from high school. The community

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college offered two years of basic university level education. I thought I could start right away, but because of my visa status as an international student, I had to postpone my enrollment. The struggles with these administrative processes continued and were not something that any of my local friends had to go through. At the International Student's Office, I remember feeling awkward filling in Japanese as my nationality when I had almost never been in Japan for the last ten years. I actually lived longer in the U.S. than Japan. I felt as if my American identity was being rejected. Even though I grew up in the same area as my American friends and studied together, I was treated as a foreigner.

My years at the community college were filled with a series of identity clashes. I did not get along with my "international" peers, who were all new to the country that I grew up in. From the school office and instructors, I was always categorized and treated as an international student, who they assumed did not speak fluent English and was not used to American culture. I also experienced a major disagreement with my mother. She could not accept me being who I am as an Americanized, liberal, and gender fluid person. I could not cope with the conflicting messages I received: from inside the household, to be an obedient, good daughter and devote my life to my family; and from society outside, to be a free, independent, strong woman. I ran away from my mother's house and lived with my girlfriend through my college years. My life in the community college was tough but I was able to receive an Associate Degree in Art and Science when I reached 21.

#### MOVING BACK TO JAPAN

I wanted to continue my education in the U.S. but did not have enough money to transfer to a four-year university. Because my international student visa expired, I had no choice but to come back to Japan. Hoping that my "nation" could give me better opportunities, I decided to look for work in a country now completely foreign to me. I found a job in an international travel agency in a major city of Japan. I hoped that this job would allow me to make use of my English skills and my knowledge and experience in the United States. However, the work I did was nothing like what I expected. It was neither multicultural nor global. Here, again, I had to go through another cultural adjustment. What my employer expected was for me to act exactly as the other Japanese *shinjin* (新人).<sup>3</sup> I went to work at 7am before my senior workers and boss got to the office. My jobs there were to distribute travel flyers in the streets, to clean the storage rooms, and to move boxes of brochures from one place to the other. I went to *nomikai* (飲み会)<sup>4</sup> and poured sake for my male bosses just as other female Japanese *shinjin* struggling to "fit in" and "pass" as a typical Japanese, but I was always treated as a *Kikokushijyo* (帰国子女),<sup>5</sup> a 'weird/different' girl who's been outside of Japan for too long and could not behave properly as an ordinary Japanese. The harder I worked, the more I felt isolated in Japanese society. One day I snapped and realized that shouldn't have to try to be someone who I am not. I thought, "I'm not meant to be here and I still have the right to look for something different that fits me."

Hoping to find answers, I quit working at the travel agency. I moved to the site of the Great Eastern Japan earthquake and tsunami of 2011. I decided to live there in a shelter for tsunami victims and worked at a local elementary school as a teacher's assistant. My job was to teach two children with an American father and Japanese mother, who recently divorced, as the mother had come back to Japan with her two children. I mainly spent time with the older sister. She struggled to 'fit in' not only because of her Japanese language skills but cultural and physical differences. She was different from traditional Japanese in many ways: from how she ate, communicated, expressed her feelings, and even how she laughed. When she laughed, she laughed so loud that students from next room would hear her. She was just different from other humble countryside Japanese children but everybody loved how she laughed. Through her, I saw my own struggle with race, culture, and language. Her existence was my wake up call. She gave me motivation to make the best out of my dilemmas. I realized that I should not give up my dream for going onto higher education. From the site of the tsunami, I sent my application to an international university in Japan as it attracts diverse students including both Japanese local and international students.

#### LIFE AT A UNIVERSITY

There is an interesting term used to describe group of Japanese students at my international university and some other universities promoting internationalization. I soon realized, whether I liked it or not, I had to face another form of categorization. The term is *Junjapa*. *Jun* (純) represents pure, innocent, and clean. *Japa* (ジャパ) is a shortening for Japanese (ジャパニーズ). *Junjapa* (純ジャパ) is used to describe Japanese students who are born to Japanese parents, have never been outside of Japan for any long-term period, and speak Japanese as their first language. A significant criterion to be considered *Junjapa* is to be educated in Japan. *Junjapa* can be used as both noun and an adjective to describe students or people with a *junjapa* identity. What is unique about *junjapa* is that it is used among, and against, people of the same nationality. The definition of *junjapa* is vague and varies depending depending on individuals' perspective of Japanese identity. *Junjapa* is usually used to describe people who grew up in Japanese society, have Japanese values and looks, act Japanese, and speak fluent Japanese and faltering English. Some students would say that a person of a mixed ethnicity would not qualify for *junjapa*, even if they are born and raised in Japan. I often feel the invention of such a term is a sign of diversifying Japanese ethnicity and identity but it is also a way to express, and perhaps excuse, an ideal of a homogenous nation excluding and ignoring the complexity of the reality of being Japanese. Considering my long-term experience growing up in the United States, it is apparent that I do not "pass" the criteria for *junjapa*. In fact, I am an extreme example of non-*junjapa*<sup>6</sup> student. Here again, I did not pass, not being accepted by the majority.

Most of the Japanese students come to the international university for its English education and global education program, but I came to the university wanting to be in a multicultural environment, hoping to find answers to my feeling of being lonely

and excluded. While I was in the United State, I was a Japanese immigrant. Even in Japan, I was considered as a *gaijin* (外人).<sup>7</sup> Excluded from both nations, I was an outsider everywhere I went. I came to this university looking for my comfort zone. With its liberal arts education and multicultural environment, I believed that the university would be more accepting of diversity and that my bicultural background would be more appreciated in the international environment to feel included and accepted. I thought the university would be more accepting of people like me, but instead I was categorised and became bounded tighter than before. I was categorized as non-*Junjapa*. I was categorized under a new term ‘Skipped Program<sup>8</sup> people’ and was excluded in every way by the majority, *junjapa* students.

In the international university, because of this English-speaking environment, being in Skipped class is seen as a privilege by the *junjapa* students. I never thought that being able to speak English, by itself, was something to be proud of. Honestly, anyone would eventually have to learn to speak if you live and study in an English speaking country for over a decade! Whenever I sensed being envied by them, I wanted to tell them that ‘I did not just learn to speak English through my twelve years in the United States. Language was just one of the many struggles that I have been through’. I experienced multiple culture shocks, identity crisis, discrimination, and oppression and that was what I wanted other students to acknowledge. But instead of listening to my story, they would often imply, ‘you are privileged to be able to have had the experience speaking in English. You are different from us and you can’t understand how hard it is to speak English fluently.’ This message was in their comments I constantly received, ‘Yuko, you are NOT *junjapa* (so you don’t understand us)’. With such harsh comments, 純ジャパじゃない (You are NOT *junjapa*), I am already excluded from other Japanese students and all my struggles, of cultural adjustments and language barriers, are all ignored.

Even in classes, I am constantly reminded that I am ‘privileged’ (or should feel privileged) and thus should not complain or even admit to finding it hard to study. Whenever other students talk about their difficulties in class, “Oh I’m working on an academic essay and it is really hard,” I would agree with them as I feel writing academically is a challenge but they would just say, “Oh you wouldn’t understand. You’re a Skipped student and non-*junjapa*.” *Junjapa* students believe that just because I have higher English proficiency, I am able to write academic papers easily without any troubles. I have experience living in the United States but I am certainly not a balanced bilingual<sup>9</sup> and I did not learn to write at a university level. In fact, I do not even consider myself a ‘good’ writer. I struggled a lot in writing classes trying to learn the skills to write academic papers. I still struggle to write and express my thoughts through written English. I am not a confident writer, so I put extra effort to produce a better essay by starting to work on my essay earlier and staying up all night before turning them in. To *junjapa* students’ eyes, I am not struggling enough and I am not working hard enough.

It appears that *Junjapa* students who feel inferior in their English skills tend to believe that Skipped students are all balanced bilinguals able to read and write at a

college level. In reality, students in Skipped class come from different and diverse background and their English fluency varies based on their educational background, geographical locations, and the language/s they were immersed in. Some students have experiences growing up in English language environment whereas other students have spent most of their lives in Japan after several years of experience living abroad.

Just because Skipped students are excused from taking basic academic English courses, students in the basic courses (most of them are *junjapa* students) believe that all Skipped students are confident bilinguals and thus not able to share their challenges with other *junjapa* students. *Junjapa* students tend to believe that the basic academic English program would somehow make them become bilingual. *Junjapa* students often believe that they are disadvantaged compared to Skipped students, who are at the top of English language ‘hierarchy’ at the university. In daily conversations, these students often exclude me but when they cannot help each other for with proof reading of their essay drafts, they would ask me to ‘native/skipped check’ their papers believing I could somehow be able to improve their papers and ‘fix’ everything. They do not seem to register the fact that I am also a university student who is still learning how to write academically. In fact, *junjapa* students tend to be better at articulating grammar than I could.

*Junjapa* students’ unconscious bias towards themselves as inferiors brings higher expectation on Skipped students to achieve higher grades. These *junjapa* students believe that Skipped students can achieve higher grades easier. I felt constantly pressured to achieve higher grades. Even when I am struggling with my classwork, I could not talk to my classmates about it. All they would say was that 「でも祐子は大丈夫でしょ。英語できるじゃん。」 (But Yuko you are all OK, right because you are good at English). When I get bad grades, I received a message I was a complete failure and did not try hard enough. Even when I did get a good grade, it was naturally expected because I am not *junjapa*. It was because I am a Skipped student and I should be getting good grades. I constantly pressured myself to achieve these unrealistic expectations. I could not think about my grades and started to lose self-confidence that I was not getting enough grades for a “perfectly English native” Skipped student. I thought I had to perform better academically but I couldn’t ask any of my peers to help me out because all they said was that “oh, you don’t need my help. You’re better than me.” I really wanted to do something about this so I visited my instructor’s office almost every week to seek for a solution. Through visiting their offices and discussing with them, I decided to become a tutor at a learning center hoping to improve my own English skills by tutoring *junjapa* students.

#### STRUGGLES OF JUNJAPA STUDENTS

Through tutoring, I was able to see my peers, mainly *junjapa* students, from a different perspective. I started understanding their struggle trying to adjust their thinking patterns to fit into English academic education. The university’s ideology

expects students to get out of their comfort zone and challenge their identity, common sense, and experience but Japanese high school graduates are not used to such a challenging learning environment, and have not often experienced sharing their “own” ideas or opinions about anything in class.

I started to think that the word *junjapa* represents the dilemmas of these students and their reactions towards educational differences in both secondary and tertiary education. Japanese students (*junjapa* students) are taught to be very passive throughout their primary and secondary education in Japan. Education in Japan is still focused on translation and memorization without much emphasis on critical or logical thinking training. Students are also discouraged from asking questions or expressing their own creative ideas. Although teachers are encouraged to develop students’ critical and logical thinking by the Japanese government, most teachers are unable to do so themselves.

University-level learning means students are required to learn more independently, whereas in Japanese high schools, students were always given specific instructions on how, what, when to do, and examples of ideal answers are often provided by the teachers. Students are eventually trained to give the ‘right’ or ideal answer. Especially students who are able to enter competitive universities are very well perfecting and giving these expected answers.

When students enter university, in or outside of Japan, all students will face adjustment due to educational differences between secondary and tertiary education. I see students from English speaking countries are trained to have their own opinions throughout their education, whereas Japanese students are expected to start developing those skills after they get into university. Adjusting and changing their approaches to learning is very stressful. In a unique and more ‘international’ environment as the university offers, students tend to blame their level of English acquisition and their lack of global experience for their inability to adjust their patterns of thought, or simply believe they are not capable. Unconsciously, being *junjapa* is used as an excuse for not being able to adjust their thought process to be more critical and logical.

I think that the goal of the international university is not English language education but to be able to acquire skills to understand, analyze, and question the issues that exist in our everyday life as well as the world. Many students at the university seem to believe that being able to speak English would somehow enable them to suddenly become ‘global leaders’ when being able to understand and express themselves in English is only the first layer of the global education. The most important part of learning foreign language is to realize that language learning is not merely a study of language itself. We need to see beyond that. There is a world that exists beyond the language. Language shapes our culture, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and identity. There are cultural norms and beliefs that cannot be expressed in either Japanese or English. These complicated feelings without verbal expression exist even if we are not bilingual. Foreign language education is just an easy way to learn this inexpressible, complicated but fascinating world exists. It is an experience that allows us to see linguistic construction first hand. It allows us to realize how our thoughts and reality are shaped and limited by the language. When

people utilize another language, they will always find some expressions that exist in one language but not in the other. By being able to utilize different languages, we notice an ‘empty’ space between our minds and language.

In the world of globalization, we need to acknowledge that this space exists. We need to use the language knowing the limitations of its expression and trying to understand what has been dropped, unexpressed, or constructed and reconstructed by the language. We need to start questioning our own language, history, and pattern of thoughts. Learning another language is learning a new pattern of thinking. Because Japan is mainly mono-linguistic, *junjapa* students tend to lack chances to experience and acknowledge such spaces. By giving Japanese students a chance to live in an English speaking multicultural learning environment, the international university is offering students an opportunity to experience a range of learning so that they may realize the diversity within Japan. However, the concept of *junjapa* contradicts this ideology further categorizing and eliminating a diversifying Japanese identity. I feel Japanese people expect everyone to assimilate into mainstream culture but never admit to include them into their own group. If you look different, you are not *junjapa*. If you speak with a hint of a foreign accent, you are out. If you are a ‘double’<sup>10</sup> citizen, you are out. If your parents are not Japanese, you are out. Once a Japanese person gets a global experience, they are not considered as *junjapa*. There’s nothing you can do to pass the ‘test’ or ‘unspoken criterion’. By identifying themselves as *junjapa* and by excluding others, others like me who do not fit to the category, *junjapa* students are trying to stay in their comfort zone. Not having a group or identity, not being able to answer a simple question as “where are you from?” or “where did you grow up?” is stressful and lonely.

From looking at the global environment of an international university, others from typical Japanese universities would think that being students at this university is already having a global experience and that these students at the international university are not in fact included as *junjapa* anymore. For some reasons, *junjapa* students at the international university fail to realise the dual irony, and some of them still stubbornly consider themselves as genuine *junjapa*. Categorization and naming enable us to express and share our mind with others but also limits our freedom. Our mind is bounded by the ways of expression. Our identity is often bounded by categorization. It is a shame so many university students I have met in Japan tend to lack this understanding of diversity beyond the categorization of *junjapa*. Accepting diversity within and outside of Japan means to go beyond the categorization of others and self. *Junjapa* students need an opportunity to get out of their comfort zone and learn that identity of “purely Japanese” is an illusion, that everyone is unique regardless of their language skills, background, and experience.

#### WHO I AM NOW

I do not have a simple word that could explain who I am. But because I do not belong to any group, I am able to create and express who I really am without categorization.