

Rethinking Native-Speaker and Standard-Language Norms: Toward More Inclusive JFL
Pedagogy

母語話者規範と標準語規範の再考：より包摂的な日本語教育に向けて

Mingqi Zhang, Simon Fraser University
章銘棋, サイモンフレーザー大学

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of generative AI and language learning applications, Japanese language educators are increasingly being asked to reconsider the goals of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) education and the role of teachers. In Canadian postsecondary contexts, where learners come from diverse multilingual backgrounds and pursue varied goals for learning Japanese, this raises an important question: what does it mean to support learners in JFL education? If support is understood only as helping learners approximate native-like Japanese, it risks reinforcing the assumption that second language (L2) users are deficient versions of monolingual native speakers (Cook, 1999). It is therefore necessary to examine the norms that shape how success, legitimacy, and “good Japanese” are defined in the first place.

JFL education continues to be shaped by two interrelated norms: native-speaker norms and standard-language norms. Native-speaker norms rest on the assumption that native speakers are the most legitimate users of a language, a view tied to national belonging and to an idealized understanding of language as homogeneous (Pennycook, 2017), while standard-language norms equate legitimate language use with essentialized standardized forms, privileging Tokyo Japanese (Kubota, 2014). Together, these norms define both who counts as a legitimate user of Japanese and what counts as legitimate Japanese, often marginalizing linguistic diversity.

Although Global Englishes and related scholarship have challenged native-speaker and standard-language norms in English language education (e.g., Rose & Galloway, 2019), Japanese language education has more often treated “Japanese” as a relatively homogeneous object. While existing scholarship has critically examined these issues (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2020; Doerr, 2014, 2024; Kubota, 2014; Kumagai, 2014a, 2014b), their translation into systematic, practitioner-oriented approaches remains limited, particularly in Canadian contexts. My interest in this issue also comes from my own experience of learning Japanese in Canada. Like many learners, I came

to understand “good Japanese” as native-like and standardized. It was only later, through engaging with Global Englishes and critical applied linguistics, that I began to critically reflect on these assumptions in JFL education. Situated within this perspective, this paper argues that native-speaker norms and standard-language norms jointly shape linguistic legitimacy in JFL education and proposes a practitioner-oriented approach to more inclusive pedagogy in Canadian JFL classrooms.

2. Classroom Implications in Canada

As AI and translation tools become increasingly capable of producing grammatically accurate and standardized Japanese, JFL educators need to reconsider what learners should gain from language study and what distinctive role the language classroom can play. Rather than defining success primarily as conformity to standard and native-like Japanese, JFL education should prepare learners for forms of communication that AI cannot fully provide, including the ability to interpret context, negotiate meaning, and communicate across linguistic and social differences. This requires understanding Japanese as a socially situated and variable language. In Canadian JFL classrooms, this shift calls for changes in three interconnected areas of practice: how learners’ communicative abilities are assessed, how teaching materials represent Japanese and its users, and how learners are supported in critically examining language ideology.

2.1 Rethinking Oral Assessment and Communicative Competence

If JFL education aims to prepare learners for communicative competence rather than merely conformity to native-speaker or standard-language norms, oral assessment becomes a key site of pedagogical change. Because oral performance is often evaluated through proximity to idealized native-speaker usage, such practices can reproduce narrow assumptions about intelligibility and legitimacy. A more inclusive approach would instead prioritize intelligibility, interactional effectiveness, and meaning negotiation. Importantly, intelligibility is not an inherent property of speech but is socially situated and dependent on the listener and context (Doerr, 2014). From this perspective, treating native-speaker or standard-language norms as default benchmarks risks reinforcing broader linguistic hierarchies. Additionally, research on reverse linguistic stereotyping (e.g., Kang & Rubin, 2009) and raciolinguistic ideology (e.g., Flores &

Rosa, 2015) highlights that perceptions of accent are socially shaped, further supporting a shift toward intelligibility-based evaluation.

One practical implication is the use of pair-based assessment, which decenters the teacher's speech as the primary norm and allows learners to demonstrate intelligibility, interactional effectiveness, and meaning negotiation, rather than being judged primarily against an imagined standard form of Japanese. This aligns with Kumagai's (2014a) argument that second language education should move beyond static knowledge of standard forms and instead prepare learners to participate meaningfully in communities of practice involving both native and non-native speakers. At the same time, rethinking assessment does not require abandoning standard Japanese; instead, it means treating it as one important linguistic resource among others.

2.2 Critically Evaluating and Supplementing Teaching Materials

If JFL education aims to help learners understand Japanese as a diverse and socially situated language, teaching materials must be examined critically. In JFL contexts, textbooks and other materials play an important role in shaping learners' understandings of Japanese language and culture (Kumagai, 2014b); however, textbooks function as ideological texts that normalize particular forms of language, knowledge, values, and behavior as legitimate (Kumagai, 2014a). As a result, teaching materials can reproduce both standard-language ideology and native-speaker hierarchy unless they are critically evaluated and supplemented.

Japanese textbooks and materials overwhelmingly represent Japanese through Tokyo-based standardized forms, presenting an essentialized image of Japanese (Kubota, 2014). This tendency is evident in widely used textbooks such as *Genki*. Examining *Genki I* and *II* (1st ed.), Kumagai (2014a) notes that although some dialogues are set in Kyoto, the language presented remains standard Japanese, leaving dialectal diversity unacknowledged. A similar tendency can still be observed in the current 3rd edition (Banno et al., 2020a, 2020b). While the supplementary dialogue videos on the *Genki* website (The Japan Times Publishing, n.d.) feature a more racially diverse cast of international student characters, some of whom speak Japanese with noticeable accents, the materials still largely conform to standard Tokyo Japanese. Moreover, because these videos are supplementary rather than part of the core textbook audio, it cannot be assumed that learners will engage with them independently. Thus, although the videos offer a more visually diverse representation of foreign learners of Japanese, they do not substantially challenge the

textbook's privileging of standardized Japanese. Consequently, both linguistic diversity and the Japanese used by L2 speakers remain underrepresented. Therefore, teachers can diversify listening materials by including dialects and Japanese used by speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. In addition, they can supplement textbook content with readings written by L2, multilingual, and other underrepresented users of Japanese.

Beyond privileging standardized linguistic forms, textbooks may also present idealized models of communication and idealized images of learners of Japanese. *Genki* (1st ed.) dialogues often present fluent, error-free interaction, obscuring the role of meaning negotiation (Kumagai, 2014a), and this issue remains visible in the current 3rd edition. Teachers can therefore supplement textbook dialogues with listening clips, role-plays, and speaking tasks in which interlocutors ask for clarification and repeat or reformulate their ideas. Moreover, learners in textbooks tend to be positioned as recipients of knowledge rather than active contributors. Teachers can respond by reconfiguring knowledge roles, for example by positioning L2 learners as knowledgeable participants (Bhattacharya, 2020). Tasks that invite learners to explain, interpret, and contribute from their own linguistic, cultural, or experiential knowledge can help recognize their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds.

2.3 Developing Critical Awareness of Language Ideology

Inclusive JFL pedagogy requires explicit attention to language ideology, particularly how assumptions about standard Japanese and native speakers shape judgments of legitimacy. A key starting point is understanding that standard Japanese is a socially and historically constructed form rather than a linguistically superior one. Standardized Tokyo Japanese emerged through political and economic power (Doerr, 2014, 2024), and recognizing this helps learners view standard Japanese as one possible variety rather than the natural benchmark.

Teachers can also encourage critical reflection on language ownership. Building on earlier processes of standardization, postwar Japanese language education continued to preserve a framework in which Japanese was imagined as “the language of the Japanese” (Segawa, 2014), and native-speaker bias continues to shape perceptions of legitimacy among both L1 and L2 speakers (Takeuchi, 2023). JFL instructors therefore need to help students recognize these ideologies and develop a sense of language ownership, enabling them to challenge assumptions about who is socially permitted to sound natural, local, or legitimate when using Japanese.

Pedagogically, literary and autobiographical texts can offer effective entry points for critical reflection. Transcultural texts can help learners challenge the ideology that reserves Japanese for native speakers, develop a stronger sense of language ownership, and see themselves as active agents who can appropriate Japanese for their own purposes (Iwasaki & Kumagai, 2020). In practice, teachers can use such texts to invite learners to reflect on who is treated as a legitimate speaker, whose Japanese is framed as natural or unnatural, and how race, identity, or perceived foreignness shape judgments about language proficiency. In addition to novels, autobiographical texts may be especially useful because they allow learners to engage with lived experiences of how language, identity, and legitimacy are negotiated in everyday life.

3. Conclusion

In Canadian JFL contexts, supporting learners cannot be reduced to helping them approximate native-speaker or standardized norms. Moving toward a more inclusive JFL pedagogy requires creating classrooms where learners develop communicative competence, encounter diverse representations of Japanese and its users, and critically examine the ideologies that shape language legitimacy. Standard Japanese remains an important resource, but it should not function as the only benchmark for success. As a JFL instructor working in a multilingual Canadian context, I see this shift as essential to aligning JFL education with learners' diverse needs and the social realities of Japanese language use. Ultimately, more inclusive JFL education requires viewing learners not as deficient approximations of native speakers, but as legitimate users of Japanese, while valuing their linguistic resources, identities, and communicative practices.

References

- Banno, E., Ikeda, Y., Ohno, Y., Shinagawa, C., & Tokashiki, K. (2020a). *Genki I: An integrated course in elementary Japanese* (3rd ed.). Japan Times.
- Banno, E., Ikeda, Y., Ohno, Y., Shinagawa, C., & Tokashiki, K. (2020b). *Genki II: An integrated course in elementary Japanese* (3rd ed.). Japan Times.
- Bhattacharya, M. (2020). Language ideology and its manifestations: Exploring implications for Japanese language teaching. *Japanese Language and Literature*, 54(2), 305-316.
- Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(2), 185-209.
- Doerr, N. M. (2014). On the necessity of ‘being understood’: Rethinking the ideology of standardization in Japan. In N. M. Doerr & S. Sato (Eds.), *Rethinking language and culture in Japanese education: Beyond the standard* (pp. 63-81). Multilingual Matters.
- Doerr, N. M. (2024). Rethinking “Japanese”: Beyond the “Unit-Thinking” of Language. *Journal CAJLE*, 25, 1-21.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149-171.
- Iwasaki, N., & Kumagai, Y. (2020). “Making it your own by adapting it to what’s important to you”: Plurilingual Critical Literacies to Promote L2 Japanese Users’ Sense of Ownership of Japanese. In S. Bagga-Gupta, A. Golden, L. Holm, H. P. Laursen, & A. Pitkänen-Huhta (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing connections between language, literacy and learning* (pp. 165-186). Springer International Publishing.
- Kang, O., & Rubin, D. L. (2009). Reverse linguistic stereotyping: Measuring the effect of listener expectations on speech evaluation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 28(4), 441-456.
- Kubota, R. (2014). Standardization of language and culture. In S. Sato & N. M. Doerr (Eds.), *Rethinking language and culture in Japanese education: Beyond the standard* (pp. 19–34). Multilingual Matters.
- Kumagai, Y. (2014a). On learning Japanese language: critical reading of Japanese language textbook. In S. Sato & N. M. Doerr (Eds.), *Rethinking language and culture in Japanese education: Beyond the standard* (pp. 201-217). Multilingual Matters.

- Kumagai, Y. (2014b). The process of standardization of language and culture in a Japanese-as-a-foreign-language classroom: Analysis of Teacher—Students Interactions. In S. Sato & N. M. Doerr (Eds.), *Rethinking language and culture in Japanese education: Beyond the standard* (pp. 238-260). Multilingual Matters.
- Pennycook, A. (2017). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Routledge.
- Rose, H., & Galloway, N. (2019). *Global Englishes for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Segawa, H. (2014). Teaching Japanese people's thinking: discourses on thought patterns in post-war studies of Japanese language education. In S. Sato & N. M. Doerr (Eds.), *Rethinking Language and Culture in Japanese Education: Beyond the Standard* (pp. 175-200). Multilingual Matters.
- Takeuchi, J. D. (2023). *Language ideologies and L2 speaker legitimacy: Native speaker bias in Japan* (Vol. 172). Multilingual Matters.
- The Japan Times Publishing. (n.d.). *GENKI dialogue videos*. *Genki Online*.
<https://genki3.japantimes.co.jp/en/student/dialoguevideo.html>