

Chapter 12

Raising Awareness of Language Minorities in Japan: Teaching About the Ainu, Okinawans, and Nikkei-jin

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how power functions in relation to teaching and learning languages can provide a clearer picture of language learning. As majorities can control minorities culturally and politically, minorities often suffer language discrimination. Although Japan now has the highest number of foreign residents, it still has a relatively high degree of homogeneity, and most college students have little understanding of them. More surprisingly, they often know even less about Japan's often-overlooked minorities, such as the Ainu and Okinawans. The author demonstrates how to deploy EFL classes to raise students' awareness by using self-made teaching materials and tailored writing assignments within the framework of Exploratory Practice (EP). Drawing on these methodologies, current research on language minorities is used to support a pedagogy that builds cultural awareness by giving majority-language students an opportunity to learn about minorities even when the students' English abilities are limited, as in the case of general EFL courses.

INTRODUCTION

When the author visited Da Nang in Vietnam this past summer, there was a dance performance on a sight-seeing boat. Watching what was seemingly a Thai dance, she was surprised to learn that it was instead a dance from the *Champa* ethnic minority group whose kingdom was dominant in Vietnam until 1832. Even today, there are over 320,000 *Champa* (Campadesa) speakers in Cambodia and Vietnam. What was more surprising was the discovery that the present majority group in Vietnam knows little about them, even though they had to learn about the kingdom and the ethnic group in history classes.

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The situation in Japan, however, offers a parallel. Data helps to illustrate this. The December 2018 Immigration Control Office survey shows that Japan today hosts more non-Japanese than ever before. A total of 2,731,093 foreign nationals from some 200 countries now reside in Japan, including 409,677 mid- to long-term residents and 321,416 special permanent residents. In addition, 31.2 million foreign tourists visited Japan in 2018. Furthermore, a significant number of the foreign residents are *Nikkei-jin*, foreigners of Japanese origin. With the government recently passing a new bill to admit more foreign workers into Japan (Schwarca, 2018), the number of foreigners is sure to increase. However, these numbers do not include Japan's often-overlooked minorities, the Ainu, the *Burakumin*, descendants of the earlier outcasts, Okinawans, and resident Chinese and Koreans. According to Hicks (1997), minorities account for about six million people, or over six percent, of the total population of 125 million, though it should be noted that, in Japan, minorities are often defined not as ethnically distinctive, but rather as culturally distinctive social groups, such as the descendants of the earlier outcasts.

Despite the large number of minorities in Japan, however, as a teacher the author often gets responses reminiscent of what she found in Da Nang. When the college students in my EFL classes in Tokyo are asked about the *Nikkei* Brazilians, most of them answer they have had little or no contact with them. This is even more the case with respect to Japan's often overlooked minorities. Their responses match the results of my previous research (Sugino, 2012): Even in the city where the largest number of *Nikkei* Brazilians resided, of the 438 Japanese participants who were asked, only 20% reported any contact with *Nikkei* Brazilians—mostly as teachers, doctors, or truck drivers. Only 14 (3.2%) of the participants had some contact with them as NPO workers or volunteers, and almost none had *Nikkei* Brazilians as close friends. This is but one example of how language majorities are often little aware of language minorities.

With emphasis on the need to raise awareness of language minorities in Japan, this chapter will illustrate the potential for applying Exploratory Practice (EP) in teaching and researching even in the EFL classroom. The author will emphasize introducing language majorities to the historical and cultural conditions of language minorities as a collaborative activity that engages and reshapes both the teacher's and the students' beliefs, which is the basis of EP. To best illustrate why knowing about minorities is important and necessary, class procedures and teaching materials are introduced, including the actual reading materials developed on the Ainu, the Okinawans, and *Nikkei-jin*. These three groups were chosen because, although they have different historical, social, and linguistic backgrounds—especially the *Nikkei-jin*—the psychological distance between them and most majority-language Japanese students is similar. Although the focus could conceivably be expanded to include “hidden” minorities from other disadvantaged communities, such as resident Koreans, Chinese, or *Hisabetuburakumin* (Modern discriminated village community people), the distinctive historical and linguistic features of the Ainu, the Okinawans, and *Nikkei-jin* are especially well suited to a study of this kind. Although less discriminated against in modern times, these groups' experiences can be used to introduce students to the wide-ranging effects of language policies or the lack thereof.

It is hoped that this kind of instruction can encourage greater language awareness among the ethnic majority students because, as Hall (2002) mentions, widespread ignorance among ethnic majorities can give rise to racist attitudes toward the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities. Such instruction is valuable for teachers as well. Indeed, as Hanks (2015) states, Exploratory Practice (EP) is a form of practitioner research in language education which aims to integrate research, learning, and teaching.

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