Language, Culture and Ethnicity: A Case of Japanese Mixed Heritage Youth

ABSTRACT

Japanese reportedly have the highest ratio of interracial couples in Canada, which has led to an increased number of Japanese mixed heritage learners at post secondary institutions. However, in the field of heritage language education there has been very limited research that focuses on this segment of the population. In order to address this gap, the study attempted to provide an in-depth understanding of Japanese Mixed Heritage Youth (JMHY) by analyzing their daily language use and senses of ethnicity. Fourteen Japanese mixed heritage youths who possess a beginner’s level of Japanese proficiency (with two exceptions) participated in the study and provided a multi-set of data, including interviews, short essays on language experiences, and photos.

The study is framed by Baumann’s (1996) conceptualization/understanding of “ethnicity as culture” and JMHY culture is analyzed through the lens of “two cultural discourses” also promoted by Baumann (1999). The study avoids dichotomizing essentialized and non-essentialized views of culture and regards both views as a vital part of the culture-making process. The result of my analysis shows the complexity of the JMHY’s relation to their language use and ethnicity. While the JMHY emphasize their Japanese “halfness,” they acknowledge the coexistence of Japanese halfness with their other “half” in how they understand their ethnicity. With respect to the JMHY’s Japanese ethnicity, their tendency is to reconnect to the past, the rather reified heritage culture, but at the same time they reinterpret Japanese heritage through their daily experiences in their present contexts. JMHY’s daily language use is examined from both an intercultural competence and a multicultural competence perspective. This approach allows an investigation into how the JMHY’s home environment, including their parents, who provide cross cultural situations in daily life, contributes to the JMHY’s speech competence.

This study does not yield findings that can be readily transferable to cases of other mixed heritage youths, but it does demonstrate the importance of taking their mixed heritage background into consideration in the study of language and ethnicity. Finally, suggestions for language instructors at post secondary settings and parents of mixed
heritage persons are presented along with directions for further research in the field of heritage language education.