Japan Away from Japan: The Tehran Supplementary Japanese School

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Abstract
How can my multiracial children maintain and even improve their competency of their heritage languages? This is a common struggle of many parents and families who are raising multiracial children. Particularly, in the case of the biracial families of Japanese and Iranian heritages in Tehran, Iran, this struggle seemed quite serious. During the three years from 2013 to 2016, the authors observed Japanese-Iranian children and families at the Tehran Supplementary Japanese School where the children learned reading and writing in Japanese once a week. And the authors found that the key to successfully maintaining and improving their Japanese level greatly depended on their learning environment especially at home and in an appropriate cultural context where they could get exposed to Japanese culture as they used the language.

Keywords: learning Japanese, learning environment, learning context, bilingualism

Introduction

In what kind of environment do multiracial children learn their heritage languages effectively? What kind of support do they need? Who should they learn from? These are some of the common concerns among parents and families raising multiracial children. And these concerns are significant especially when the language in question is a minority language. As Shin (2013) pointed out, heritage languages are often marginalized from mainstream discussions because the majority populations do not see them as being relevant to their own lives.

The researchers lived in Tehran, Iran, for three years from April 2013 to March 2016 and taught at the Tehran Supplementary Japanese School once a week as volunteer assistant teachers. It is a parent-run weekend heritage language school located in the western part of Tehran. At the school, children of Japanese and Iranian heritages learn reading and writing in Japanese. Most of these children were born in Japan to a Japanese mother and an Iranian father who got acquainted and married in Japan. They moved to Tehran with their family at some point in their toddler years. These children go to their local Iranian school on weekdays, socialize with their Iranian friends, family and relatives, and experience Iranian rituals and events throughout the year. Their dominant societal language is Persian.

In recent years, the community of the Japanese living in Tehran has been quite small due to the decreasing diplomatic, political and commercial activities between Japan and Iran. The number of the Japanese residing in Iran was approximately 620 according to the survey conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in October, 2015 (“Basic Data of Islamic Republic of Iran”, 2016). This fact implies that there are quite limited opportunities for Japanese-Iranian children and their families to use Japanese outside the home. Shi (2009) claimed that “the home language is a minority language and isolated from the speech community of the language” (p.148). And in fact, this is also the case for most Japanese-Iranian families living in Tehran.

As opposed to this reality, Japanese mothers from the Tehran Supplementary Japanese School were increasingly encouraging their children to maintain their Japanese and even further improve it and taking an active role in their learning of the language. These mothers pointed to the necessity of their children’s competency of Japanese for pursuing better future academic and career opportunities and appreciating their biracial heritages of their parents. One mother said, “I want my child to understand the importance and advantage of his biracial background as he becomes fluent both in Japanese and Persian. I also believe being bilingual will eventually lead him to various future possibilities.”

The researchers noticed that there are a few children who are outstanding as bilinguals at the school. From our observation of these children, we found that their Japanese mothers were making a tremendous effort that contributed to their success. We chose three of these mothers and conducted interviews with them in February and March 2017 to examine how they contributed to their children’s progress especially at home. Also, the researchers found that maintaining and improving a heritage language

greatly depends on an appropriate cultural context where learners can be exposed to the culture as they learn the language. Although heritage language education and bilingualism have been often discussed, little research has been done on cases of heritage language education of Japanese-Iranian children.

Thus, our research questions are the following:

- How does the role of Japanese mothers affect the development of their Japanese-Iranian children's competency of Japanese?

- What implications do these findings have for educators and researchers whose interests are heritage language education, bilingualism and learning Japanese?

This study is significant as it explores the role of the mothers of children learning a heritage language and the challenges that they face although it primarily sheds light on a small group of participants. However, as the world becomes globalized and closer, it aims to examine possibilities for a wider community whose interests are heritage language education, bilingualism or learning Japanese.

Related Research

According to Shin (2013), a heritage language is also known as a community language, native language, and a mother tongue mostly used by immigrants and their children. In her study of Latino students in American schools, Valdés (2001) noted that a heritage language speaker is a person who grew up in a home where a language other than English is used and who are bilingual in the home language and English. Thus, for Japanese-Iranian children who immigrated to Iran with their Iranian father and Japanese mother, Japanese is their heritage language. And they are heritage language speakers of Japanese who are also proficient in Persian, the majority language in their society.

In many cases of heritage language speakers, they often feel disconnected from speakers of the majority language due to their outsider position inherited from the native culture of their parents (Makinina, 2013). Furthermore, "promoting the interests of minority populations is not a priority for majority populations" (Shin, 2013, p.78), so heritage language speakers tend to easily lose motivation to maintain their heritage language. Children who are not raised with the cultural and linguistic background dominantly observed in the school are likely to experience conflict (Romaine, 2000). Consequently, Japanese-Iranian children living in Tehran may not be able to relate their heritage language to their immediate Iranian society and may end up giving up on maintaining it.

Therefore, parents' active involvement plays an essential role in the development of their children's heritage language. On bilingual education in the US, Brisk (1998) pointed to the necessity of the parental role of developing the heritage language and culture and encouraging their children to learn English to function in their immediate

society. In Japanese-Iranian families in Tehran, Japanese mothers' devotion and effort contribute to their children's successful Japanese development. Nesteruk (2010), in her research on heritage language maintenance and loss among Eastern European children in the US, mentions that mothers, especially those who are not fluent in the dominant language and who has little contact with it, help maximize early heritage language exposure. She also pointed out that these mothers are even capable of teaching their children the basics of reading and writing in their heritage language in addition to teaching speaking in it.

However, Makinina's (2013) study found the following:
It is important to help students recognize the uses and purposes of their heritage language that go beyond so-called 'kitchen Russian' of predominantly informal communication into a wider academic and professional life, and promote lifelong learning. These issues arise not only for speakers of Russian, but in a wide variety of ways for all heritage language learners (p.42).

To elaborate on Makinina's view, Shibata (2000) claimed that weekend schools were one of the best ways to support heritage language learners in a wider community outside the home as "there is a limit to parent's efforts regarding ability, patience, time and resources in the long term" in supporting their children with the maintenance of their heritage language (p.339). According to Shi (2009), there are many advantages to this style of bilingual education, such as sharing teaching ideas, reduced fatigue from teaching alone, and children being able to meet peers (p.148). Moreover, Brown (2011) found out that parents clearly linked the benefits of keeping their children's heritage language to broadened opportunities for employment (p.34). In addition to these practical advantages, "it is the heritage language that provides a sense of identity to immigrants and their children" (Brown, 2011, p.33). Shin (2013) also pointed out that higher heritage language proficiency promotes a stronger sense of bicultural identity.

Favorable attitudes toward and understanding of heritage language learners in the majority community are also highly expected in terms of successful heritage language education. Brisk (1998) noted that heritage language learners are more willing to advance within the system in which the dominant society respects their culture and background. To develop learners' linguistic and sociocultural skills, adults and schools need to support learners' efforts in maintaining their culture while also learning to function in the dominant culture (Brisk, 1998).

Method

This article is based on an ethnographic study that looks into how three Japanese-Iranian children who lived in Tehran and attended the Tehran Supplementary Japanese School for three to eight years maintained their Japanese. The focus was put mainly on their Japanese mothers' contribution to their bilingual development. The collected data was analyzed qualitatively. According to Merriam (1998), there are four characteristics of qualitative research: the researcher (1) is interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed (2) is the primary instrument for

data collection and analysis (3) must get involved in fieldwork such as observation, and (4) employs an inductive research approach in which theory is built from observations and understandings gained in the data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study is mainly based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with the children's Japanese mothers in February and March, 2017, in which the researchers communicated with them via email. However, informal data such as anecdotal conversations related to the study were also included in order to triangulate the data from the interviews. All the interviews and conversations were done in Japanese. In addition, the researchers' interaction with and direct observation of the children and their families in Tehran over the three-year period between 2013 and 2016 were analyzed as they complement the study. This is an exploratory study. The findings will not be applied to Japanese-Iranian children and families in general as the focus of this study is on a small group of three participant families.

Participants

Three Japanese mothers who were raising their Japanese-Iranian children bilingually in Tehran and had children between 12 and 19 years of age were recruited for the study. All of the mothers knew the objectives of this study and were chosen because of their commitment to raising their children bilingually. The researchers knew all the mothers and families as they taught the children at the Tehran Supplementary Japanese School as volunteer teachers. The families had similar backgrounds in terms of the parents' level of education and socioeconomic status. All members of the families except infants were bilingual of Japanese and Persian.

All the participant mothers and children are addressed by their pseudonym in the study. Sakura Yamada is the mother of Hayato who was 19 years old when the interview was conducted. Mayumi Sato is the mother of Ryota, 14 years old. Asami Ozaki's daughter, Nana, was 12 years old. All the three children were born and spent their infant and toddler years in Japan. The mothers understood basic Persian for daily communication outside their home. The children's Iranian fathers used to live and work in Japan for seven to 18 years. They were fairly fluent in Japanese. The home language in the three families was Japanese.

Mrs. Yamada and Hayato moved to Tehran when he was five years old. He lived there for 12 years and five months until he graduated from high school, and now he is living in Japan alone and searching for a job. He has a younger sister and a younger brother. They live in Tehran with their parents. Mrs. Sato and Ryota started living in Tehran when he was one year and seven months old. They moved back to Japan in the middle of his second year in junior high school and goes to junior high school in Japan now. His Iranian father still lives in Tehran alone. He has no siblings. Mrs. Ozaki moved to Tehran with Nana when Nana was three years and six months old. After having lived there for six years and five months, they went back to Japan with

the rest of their family. Nana goes to junior high school in Japan now. She has a younger sister.

The Tehran Supplementary Japanese School is a parent-run weekend heritage language school where Japanese-Iranian children learn reading and writing in Japanese on Thursday mornings. In Iran, the weekend is Thursdays and Fridays. The children go to their local Iranian school, either public or private, from Saturday to Wednesday. The word "supplementary" means "hoshu" and "school" "ko" in Japanese, so the school is known as the "Hoshu-ko" in its own community. In this article, the school is referred as the Hoshu-ko hereafter. There are four classes: grades one and two, grades three and four and grades five and six in elementary, and grades one to three in junior high. Each class normally has three to ten students.

The Hoshu-ko was established in 2009 voluntarily by a group of Japanese mothers with support from their Iranian husbands. It aims to teach Japanese-Iranian children how to read and write in Japanese, give them opportunities to experience Japanese culture and raise their awareness of the importance of learning Japanese as their heritage language (http://www.zenkaiken.jp/teheran/index.html). However, the school has not been officially approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan since its establishment. Although Hoshu-ko students occasionally join cultural and sporting events at the Japanese School of Tehran[1] where children of Japanese expat families living in Tehran temporarily for business take subject courses based on the curricula designated by the Ministry of Education of Japan, the Hoshu-ko does not receive enough support from the local Japanese community. At the Hoshu-ko, Japanese mothers take turns to serve on the management or work as teachers or assistant teachers. And the mother-turned teachers develop their own teaching materials and design their lessons.

Hayato first joined the Hoshu-ko when he was ten as a second grader in elementary and attended for six years. Ryota studied at the school for eight years from grade one in elementary to grade two in junior high. Nana spent three years from grade two to four in elementary. The patterns of language use of Japanese and Persian in the three families are shown in Table 1.

Findings

Mrs. Yamada's Strategies for Promoting Hayato's Bilingualism

According to Mrs. Yamada, it was very important for her to raise Hayato as a bilingual. She pointed out that bilingualism would offer him a wide variety of choices in the future. For example, her husband and she had known since Hayato's early childhood that they would send him back to Japan for higher education or a career opportunity partly because he would have better opportunities there, and partly

[1] The Japanese School of Tehran is partially financed by the local board of Japanese corporations based in Tehran and follows the curricula of the Ministry of Education of Japan. The teachers are sent from Japan by the ministry.

because he would not want to remain in Iran after becoming 18 years old when all Iranian boys have to join the army for compulsory military service.

Table 1. Language Use in the Three Families

	Basic Daily Language Use of the Three Families	Language Used by/with the Children Before Starting the Hoshu-ko	Language Used by/with the Children After Starting the Hoshu-ko
Hayato Yamada	-Japanese was the language used every day at home. -Hayato spoke in Japanese with his younger siblings. -His Iranian relatives addressed him in Persian.	-Hayato spoke only in Japanese with his mother. -When he lived in Japan, his father spoke to him in Persian and he learned basic Persian greetings and numbers. -He was addressed in Persian in kindergarten in Tehran which he started at age 6 years. -After he started elementary school, he started using Persian more than before. -His father helped him with his homework in Persian.	-Hayato spoke in Japanese with his family and Persian outside the home. -He used Persian when he did homework with his father. -He started learning reading and writing in Japanese. -He communicated with other Japanese-Iranian children both in Japanese and Persian. -He occasionally chatted with friends and family in Japan online. -He liked reading cartoons and playing games in Japanese.
Ryota Sato	-Japanese was the language used in everyday conversations at home when all the family members were together. -Ryota was addressed in Persian when he was with his Iranian relatives.	-Ryota spoke only in Japanese with his mother. -When he was in Japan, his father taught him basic Persian vocabulary such as names of fruit and vegetables. -He was often in a Persian-only environment after he moved to Tehran at age 1 year and 7 months. -His mother taught him Japanese on a regular basis in addition to	-Ryota spoke in Japanese whenever he was with his mother. -He used mostly Persian outside the home and when he was only with his father. -He started learning reading and writing in Japanese. -He was addressed both in Japanese and Persian by his Japanese-Iranian friends. -He talked with his extended family in Japan online.

		daily conversations. -He started speaking only in Persian when he is with his father after he started elementary school.	-He read books of his interests in Japanese.
Nana Ozaki	-Japanese was the everyday language used by all members of the family. -Nana spoke in Japanese with her younger sibling. -She was addressed in Persian when she was with her Iranian relatives.	-Nana spoke only in Japanese. -She did not learn any Persian until she started kindergarten in Tehran at age 3 years and 10 months. -She sometimes watched movies or read picture books in Japanese. -She started using both Japanese and Persian depending on the situation after she started kindergarten.	-Nana spoke in Japanese at home and Persian outside the home. -She started learning reading and writing in Japanese. -She liked reading books in Japanese in her free time. -She communicated with her extended family in Japan online. -She used both Japanese and Persian when she was with Japanese-Iranian friends.

Mrs. Yamada always made sure that Hayato spoke only in Japanese to her and the other members of his family except when he worked on his school assignments with his father in Persian. So, she was quite confident that Hayato acquired a native-level fluency in Japanese for daily conversations. What contributed to his fluency in spoken Japanese is not just his everyday communication with his family in Japanese. In addition, Hayato spent his four-month summer vacation with his family in Japan every year from age eight to 13. He attended school in his neighborhood for several weeks each time experiencing a variety of events and activities, learning different subjects in a Japanese classroom setting, and most importantly being fully exposed to Japanese and Japanese culture.

Mrs. Yamada taught Hayato how to read and write basic Japanese letters at home, but she could not deny the difficulty of teaching him when it came to teaching of *kanji* characters and how to read stories critically. She said, “Unlike daily conversations, teaching my son reading and writing was much more difficult than I had expected. Both of us often got emotional and frustrated when he did not understand something or made errors.” Mrs. Yamada recalled that Hayato and she reduced their stress as he started learning at the Hoshu-ko. It became his first opportunity in Tehran to learn Japanese from Japanese adults except his mother and to learn with Japanese-Iranian peers in a formal setting. Hayato, in addition to learning reading and writing in Japanese in class, not only enjoyed chatting with his peers in informal Japanese, but

also learned how to speak to adults politely in addition to learning reading and writing in Japanese in class.

Mrs. Sato's Strategies for Promoting Ryota's Bilingualism

Mrs. Sato pointed to the benefits of being bilingual to Ryota emphasizing its role in understanding his roots. She said, "My Iranian husband and I want our son to be proud of his roots and understand both his heritage cultures. It will guarantee him an ability to perceive the world in a flexible way." She claimed that being bilingual had cognitive advantages as well and believed that her son would learn third and fourth languages easily. Also, as in Hayato's case, Mrs. Sato wanted Ryota to have high school and higher education back in Japan so that he would be exempted from the mandatory military service in Iran.

Mrs. Sato used Japanese with Ryota thoroughly. Even when he spoke to her in Persian when he was very little, she persistently spoke to him in Japanese until he completely understood Japanese was the only language to be used with her. His Iranian father was also very understanding and made sure that Ryota always used Japanese whenever his mother was present. He developed a native-level fluency in Japanese for daily communication, and according to Mrs. Sato, he demonstrated great skills of reading and writing in Japanese as well.

Mrs. Sato involved herself in the development of Ryota's learning Japanese to a great extent. For instance, at his early ages she regularly read Japanese picture books, sang Japanese nursery songs, and showed Japanese TV programs for children to him and had him play with the Japanese language on online educational sites. When he was about to be four, she started showing Japanese animations and reading Japanese story books to him, playing Japanese card games with him and teaching him how to read and write basic Japanese letters. When Ryota started showing his interest in music, Mrs. Sato decided to have him take piano lessons from a Japanese pianist coincidentally living nearby. Mrs. Sato tried every possible way for her son to be exposed to and use Japanese as much as possible.

During Ryota's elementary school years in Tehran, Mrs. Sato took him back to Japan every summer for two to four months to have him live with his Japanese family and attend school in the neighborhood. As he went back to the same school every time he was back in Japan, students and teachers of the school always looked forward to his return and welcomed him each time. This positive environment encouraged him to learn school subjects in Japanese actively at the school. Also, Mrs. Sato involved Ryota in the local community especially with children of similar ages. For instance, he went to a swimming school and a music school. At the latter, he interacted a lot with other Japanese children by playing the piano or traditional Iranian instruments to accompany their music in a practice session or even at a recital.

Even though Mrs. Sato was extremely eager to teach Ryota Japanese and give him as many opportunities as possible to use the language in Tehran and Japan, she voiced her concern and limitation of continuing teaching him at home especially when it

came to improving his reading and writing. She said, “Mothers tend to teach their own children strictly, and children get rebellious to their mothers. So, this kind of teaching/learning sometimes doesn’t have meaningful outcomes.” Thus, she admitted that the teachers at the Hoshu-ko made a tremendous contribution to the development of his reading and writing skills.

Mrs. Ozaki’s Strategies for Promoting Nana’s Bilingualism

Mrs. Ozaki said that it was essential to her and her husband that their daughter, Nana, be fluent in both Japanese and Persian. Mrs. Ozaki insisted that by being fluent in two or more languages she would acquire high communicative skills and be able to understand people from different backgrounds and cultures in the future. Her Iranian husband and she always addressed Nana in Japanese until she finished kindergarten. From then on, she used both Japanese and Persian with her father and younger sister depending on the situation while she kept using only Japanese with her mother. Mrs. Ozaki continuously provided her Japanese DVD’s and books that she liked. As a result, Nana became interested in reading and writing in Japanese.

Mrs. Ozaki’s priority was to give Nana quality education. Nana attended the above-said Japanese School of Tehran for about two years. Mrs. Ozaki and her husband agreed that she would receive better education there than at Iranian elementary schools. At the Japanese School, Nana, studied all the subjects from monolingual Japanese teachers, with mostly monolingual Japanese classmates in a typical Japanese classroom setting. And all the classes and conversations were done in Japanese excluding the Persian and English classes. Through her Japanese school life, she experienced Japanese cultural events and extracurricular activities, and had close-knitted relationships with her Japanese friends and their families.

Nana did not need a lot of help from her mother with her learning reading and writing in Japanese thanks to her education at the Japanese School. She left the school for a number of reasons and transferred to a local Iranian elementary school. At the same time, she started studying at the Hoshu-ko. Having had an adequate instruction of reading and writing in Japanese, Nana demonstrated an extremely outstanding ability at the Hoshu-ko. One of the researchers, as the assistant teacher of her class, remembers that she was constantly improving her Japanese proficiency and that she was one of the few students who were able to read and write critically in Japanese. Furthermore, when Nana attended a local Japanese elementary school while she was with her Japanese family back in Japan in summer, she had no major difficulty in catching up with the subject classes taught in Japanese.

Discussion

This study reveals, first, the approaches to childhood bilingualism from the perspective of three Japanese mothers of Japanese-Iranian children; second, the role of the mother in developing bilingualism; and third, the challenges the families faced. The mothers of this study were motivated to teach their children Japanese as they were aware of “the social, emotional, cognitive, and economic advantages of

bilingualism" (Rodríguez, 2015, p. 189). All of the mothers said that there would be better academic and professional opportunities in Japan or elsewhere if they spoke more than two languages. Also, these families believed that maintaining their heritage language would lead their children to understand their biracial background and help build their identity. What was distinctive in this study was that the families had known even since their immigration to Iran that they would go back to Japan or at least send their child back alone sometime in the future. Therefore, raising their children fluent both in Japanese and Persian was one of their biggest concerns.

As Rodríguez (2015) pointed out, parents have "the responsibility for transmitting their language to their children" (p.190). In the participant families, it was the Japanese mothers who made the biggest contribution to the successful development of their children's bilingualism. They had persisted on their Japanese-as-the-home-language policy since their children were infants. Their Iranian husbands and other family members also followed the policy. They taught vocabulary, lullabies, songs, stories, and games in their native language at home. Also, they managed to teach basic reading and writing of Japanese with which they had difficulty later in their children's bilingual development. They all recognized the essential role of the Hoshu-ko in terms of the instruction of formal and written Japanese. At the school, their children learned Japanese of different types of formality by interacting with Japanese teachers and friends from similar backgrounds, by experiencing Japanese culture in class and also by joining events at the Japanese School of Tehran a few times in the year. In addition, the mothers enlisted the support of their extended families by using online video calls to communicate with family members living in Japan in Japanese and by visiting Japan to send their children to a local school for several months almost every year.

However, in Tehran, Persian is the majority language and dominates people's lives in their everyday affairs from work and education to politics, economy, information exchange and personal relationships. On the contrary, Japanese is a minority language and has almost no significance to the public. It is not astonishing that parents of Japanese-Iranian families struggle to give their children opportunities to learn and use Japanese in the community given the fact that there is society's pressure on them to acquire Persian. Overcoming these obstacles requires the involvement and collaboration of parents and educators in the context of the community (Rodríguez, 2015, p.191).

Fasciano (2014) pointed to the necessity of providing learners opportunities to "use their language in local and global communities, relate that language to the learners' life and provide purpose for the continued use of that language" (p.22). As per Dewey (1938), educators should consider learning as the continuum of learners' immediate community. Community engagement in language learning provides the learner with the opportunity to understand and engage with the target cultures and gain insight into the nuances of the regional language and perspective (Fasciano, 2014, p.23). Unfortunately, in Tehran, communal support for Japanese-Iranian children and understanding of the benefits of having these bilingual children to the local community are not adequate. As a result, their Japanese mothers are the ones who are

solely responsible for their children's bilingual development along with support from their husbands. And also, the Hoshu-ko cannot help positioning itself isolated from the local community.

Conclusion

To respond to our research questions, we identified the following prominent themes that provide evidence of how important the mother's role in the child's acquisition and maintenance of Japanese as a heritage language in Japanese-Iranian families in Tehran: using Japanese as the home language, teaching the child basic Japanese at home from early ages, exposing her/him to Japanese as much as possible, sending her/him to a heritage language school, and receiving support from extended families in Japan as summarized in the discussion. However, this study indicates that there is a limitation of the role of the mother especially in the instruction of formal and written Japanese. Also, it points out that support for and understanding of children learning a heritage language in the community are quite essential for the successful development of their bilingualism.

To conclude, we would like to make the following implications. First, parents, together with the educators of the Hoshu-ko, need to find ways to have members of the local Iranian community acknowledge and think positively of the existence of the school and its children. This way they can create a positive learning environment for their children. Additionally, heritage language learners especially when they are minorities in their community, it is difficult but necessary for them to learn the language and its culture side by side in an appropriate, possibly authentic, cultural context. In the situation of the participants of this study, they should definitely work collaboratively and closely with local Japanese communities such as the Japanese School of Tehran and Japanese expat families in the future. For example, they should hold more Japanese cultural events together and have more opportunities to interact with each other at individual, familial and organizational levels. Through these events and interaction, Japanese-Iranian children can relate the Japanese language to their life and motivate themselves to learn it. As for the Japanese community members, they can find their life in Tehran more meaningful as they learn about Iranian culture from interacting with Japanese-Iranian families.

The findings can be applied to many cases of children's heritage language acquisition and maintenance. And yet as this study was conducted only on three particular mothers and their children, further research will be necessary to appeal to a wider, more general community of learners, parents and educators who are involved in heritage language education, bilingualism and learning Japanese.

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