No-Level Brick Foreign Language Education:
Expectations Towards Language Teaching

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Abstract
This study explores dynamic relationships between students and student-facilitators, aiming to explore how student expectations influence their relationship and thus language learning experience and outcomes in a unique dialogic Japanese as a foreign language course at an Italian university. In adult language education, facilitators are expected to 'support' student learning achievement while respecting their autonomy and thus allowing students to take responsibility within the learning process (Umeda, 2005; Balboni, 2014). However, the facilitators are often seen to fulfill the role of the teachers who often take an initiative in guiding student learning. The dialogic Japanese language course in this research asks us to reconsider such aforementioned expectations towards 'facilitators' in language classrooms when the facilitators are peer-students whose role is to promote its dialogic approach in and outside the classroom. This qualitative case study (Duff, 2012) explores the data from the reports produced by students and student-facilitators, relating it to the researcher's participant observation and own experience as a facilitator within the course. This research found that the student expectations toward the facilitators were strongly influenced by how they positioned each other in the learning environment. Findings highlight the necessity for a de-standardization of language education in order to head towards a more inclusive, boundary-crossing learning environment.

Keywords: foreign language education, facilitator, student expectations, language pedagogy

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Introduction. Peer-facilitator: a companion against uneasiness?

This study aims to explore student expectations towards language education by considering their engagement with 'facilitators' in a dialogic Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) course at an Italian university. In particular, this research focuses on their relationships with 'peer-facilitators', trying to understand how they were socially positioned in the learning environment and their impact on the development and outcomes of students' experience of the course.

Two years ago, when I was still a master's degree student in this very institution and I had the chance to first participate to the "Identifying my research theme" course, based on "Japanese for thinking" (Hosokawa, 2004), I was able to observe how many students like myself found themselves baffled when they confronted with the novelty of the activity; however, their rejection of it as a language learning course has then led me to investigate the reason behind such reaction, driving my interest in student expectations towards language education.

This considered, I believe it is important now to recall my previous research on student expectations towards language education and the "Japanese for thinking" approach because of an aspect of the data I have collected in that previous occasion. In order to deepen my understanding of students' perspective on the course, in fact, I carried out interviews with some of them, which I had cautiously selected on basis of their attitude and reactions as well as their outcomes throughout the course, as I carried out participant observation (Alessandrini, 2019; 2020). Among them, student A., who had formed an overall negative opinion of the activity, spontaneously admitted, as he/she was recalling and discussing his/her experience throughout the interview with me (Italian to English, my translation):

> Talking to you, as you have a clear idea of Hosokawa's work, and you have carried out this project as well… (This) would help me come up with more ideas. (Interview with student A. from the "Identifying my research theme" course, academic year 2017-18; May 5th, 2018)

Such acknowledgment on his/her side points out the possibility for students to gain a different awareness of their involvement in the activity, if they happen to confer about it together with a more experienced participant. Indeed, the "Identifying my research theme" course did not define nor involve such possibility, as facilitators weren't expected to be involved in the activity.

A year later, having had the opportunity to participate as 'peer-facilitator' to the aforementioned JFL course, also inspired to the approach of "Japanese for thinking", I started questioning if the presence of 'facilitators' could therefore help students mitigate their "uneasiness" caused by such concept. Contrary to what I had previously assumed, not only it was still underlying, but it was also directed elsewhere: this time, I was still able to observe students experiencing "uneasiness" but towards me, because of my presence as a 'facilitator'. What had happened? What kind of expectations did students have towards 'facilitators'?

Literature review: Understanding the facilitator in language education

At Ca' Foscari University of Venice, dialogic language education approach-based courses have been ideated and carried out by professor Marcella Mariotti from as early as 2010: drawing on the idea of fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding through foreign language learning and teaching (Council of Europe 2001), such courses aim at creating a place for citizenship education through active learning classes (Hosokawa, Ōtsuji & Mariotti, 2016). Participants are invited to consider and engage in dialogue together about a theme of their choice, eventually questioning their own values and thus becoming more aware of underlying ideologies through critical thinking and communication in a foreign language.

Considered the uniqueness of this course among language teaching and learning practices, an overview of facilitators conceptualization as actors inside the classroom is contemplated as necessary. Being a fundamental component of this activity, dialogue permeates every aspect of this activity: it is through dialogue that participants form and express what they are thinking and state their opinion to others; it is through dialogue that they have the chance to broaden and transform their view in confronting with each other; it is through dialogue that they discuss and decide criteria for personal and mutual evaluation. Thus, given their role of active participants in the educational activity, 'facilitators' in these course are subjects engaging in such dialogical exchange together with students; moreover, they are introduced by the teacher to them as such, and they usually consist in a group of peers to the students, not necessarily in terms of age and belonging to the same affiliation.

Until now, I have been keeping the term 'facilitator' between single quotation marks in an attempt to refer specifically to the figure involved in this approach, thus differentiating it from the more wide-spread notion of facilitator in language education; this is due not only to the novelty of its conceptualization, but also to the blurred outline surrounding its definition inside the language learning and teaching landscape. In fact, whereas it is apparent that the concept of 'facilitation' does exist inside the language classroom, it is also often associated with the teacher; moreover, producing a definition *per se* appears to be a much complex process, as it is often presented as an attribute, a change in condition of the teacher rather than a standalone participant.

In recent times, learner-centered approaches have become a mainstay in language education practices, entailing a re-definition of the teacher from a figure dispensing knowledge to a "guide on the side" (Morrison, 2014) who can mentor the student through the learning experience. The shift entails a more well-balanced relationship among the two participants, with the teacher not positioning as an informant of knowledge and instructions, but taking a step back so that the student becomes in charge of his/her own involvement in learning; this would grant learners with the opportunity to develop more autonomy as well as responsibility towards their learning process and achievements, thus fostering motivation (Umeda, 2005; Balboni, 2014; Caon, 2017). However, the teacher, now facilitator, does not disappear from the picture, rather developing into a promoter of communication (Antón, 1999, p. 303), mediating among learners and, in this case, language learning (Balboni, 2014, p. 4). Grasha (1994, p. 143a) defines being a facilitator as a "teaching style", focused on

fostering learners' "capacity for independent action and responsibility. [The facilitator] works with students in a consultative fashion and provides much support and encouragement". Such explorative approach adopted by teachers as facilitators turns their guiding feature into an appropriate description for their actions; nevertheless, Grasha (1994, p. 143b) also points out how it could "make students uncomfortable if it's not used in a positive and affirming manner".

As Nunan indicates, the learner-centered approach is well implemented in language education under the light of communicative language teaching, first-hand promoted by the Council of Europe and involving the idea of learners "develop[ing] the ability to use language to get things done" (2013, p. 31a), thus highlighting their purpose and motivation behind their utterances; this way, students' "wider experience of life" (2013, p. 31b) can be brought into perspective and relate to their language learning and educational process. However, while this involves a shift of focus from grammatical correctness to learners' life outside the classroom, teachers are still vastly "incorporating elements of structural practice and grammar teaching in their classroom" (Nunan, 2013, p. 32). This confirms to be a major difference between the characteristics of the facilitator in language education and the approach considered in this study, which I will explore in deep by introducing the case study for this research.

Case study: Giving meaning to the 'facilitator'

As anticipated in the introduction, the course considered as a case-study for this research was held during the second semester of the academic year 2018-19 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice; by professor Marcella Mariotti (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy), it was aimed at third year bachelor's degree students in Japanese studies, thus configuring as a JFL course.

Titled "My future", on the more practical side the course entailed writing a report in Japanese language, through which students would focus on their personal dreams and goals; to do so, they would engage in dialogue with peers and the teacher inside the classroom, and with an external interlocutor of their choice, thus developing critical thinking skills and critical awareness about their projects for the future throughout the process. Moreover, students would have been in charge of presenting their finished work to the class, before proceeding to both self- and reciprocal evaluation based on the criteria decided through respectful and pondered discussion on the activity. The course consisted of 15 classes of 90 minutes each; while over 60 students have been attending the earliest classes, only 48 managed to complete the course until the very end.

As the number of the students wouldn't allow proper individual engagement, they were asked to organize themselves, after consultation with each other, in 11 different groups divided by 'theme' of their reports (e.g. shared goal or dream for the future; similar occupational perspective): each group was made up of an average of 4 students, as well as one facilitator. Among facilitators (13 of them in total), 10 of them were of Italian background, while it was Japanese for the remaining 3; moreover, 9 of them had already had previous experience of "Japanese for thinking" theory or approach, and 7 facilitators had participated to the course as they were directly interested in (Japanese) language education; finally, 6 facilitators were interns of the project "NoLBrick - No Level-Brick Language Learning: Transformative Language

Education" - SPIN (Supporting Principal INvestigator), conducted by prof. Marcella Mariotti and funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

In this context, dialogue proves to be the driving force of the course, as it provides learners (and participants as a whole, hence they are also involved in the thinking process) with the opportunity to confront themselves with perspectives other than their own, negotiating meaning in foreign language to express their opinion and confronting with other, thus aiming to citizenship formation. The process of language learning does not remain self-referential inside the pages of a textbook, nor does require practices for their own sake, as the students are engaged and encourage in concrete communication about a topic they care for; while it *does* support students in consolidating their foreign language competence through continuous interaction, the presence of facilitators goes far beyond simply guiding students regarding how to navigate as they approach a topic they don't know:

> The role of the facilitators was to promote critical thinking and help them (the students) orientate and focalize their thoughts. They ought to imply the *maieutic* method to stimulate students to question themselves and explore the target language. (Ligabue, 2019, p. 7a)

As described above Ligabue, who has participated in the aforementioned course as a facilitator himself, highlights the "maieutic" process as the prominent feature in the intervention of facilitators, conjoined with the opportunity to explore a foreign language through the student quest in expressing their thoughts. However, he also stresses their relevance as a figure *in-between* students and the teacher:

> […] the facilitator can be defined as *a mediator who tries to fill the gap between the frightening character of the professor and the shyness of the student*; someone who does not question students but *helps them when they do not know what critical questions they should ask themselves*. (Ligabue, 2019, p. 7b)

By name in this context, the facilitator is neither a student, nor the teacher; and, if any apprehension in having to engage with the teacher may be in action, disrupting students' effort in the dialogue, connecting with a figure considered other than the latter would ease students to open up. Thus, potentially even being the same age or still students and colleagues of the learners, peer-facilitators foster motivation so that students can focus on communicating with each other, hence creating ideal conditions for students' affective filter reduction (Caddeo, Ligabue, Mariko, Nishida 2019) and facilitating language acquisition (Krashen, p. 1982).

Complying by such interpretation, the dynamics intertwined between facilitators and students as participants to the course here considered as a case study should ideally contribute in stemming student uneasiness caused by its approach: this because learners find themselves in the condition to create a meaningful relationship with facilitators, and confer with them about aspects of the activity causing concern. Looking into its specific instances involving facilitators, such as the beginners-aimed course held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2016 (Mariotti & Ichishima 2017; Arleoni 2017), peer-facilitators (here referred to as "tutor") were ultimately described as "a guide, a support and a source of motivation" (Arleoni 2017, p. 71; Italian to English, my translation). If we consider the positive impact registered in these

experiences, how can "uneasiness" manifested towards facilitators throughout the course and here considered as a case study be interpreted?

Study design and findings: Relating to the facilitator

In order to pursue this research, I have taken advantage of my experience as a facilitator in the course, which constitutes a qualitative case study (Duff 2012), and I have carried out participant observation in class throughout all the scheduled activities; the data I have personally collected consists in field notes as well as audio recordings. Since I was myself a member of only one group, recordings are mainly (as they also include interactions between the teacher talking to the class as a whole) restricted to the events happened among its participants; in detail, my group was made up by 2 facilitators (1 of Italian background, 1 of Japanese background) and 5 students (all of them of Italian background).

I have also drawn upon an online database, consisting in the student reports handed in for evaluation, their discussion threads on the online platform employed to provide long-distance interaction other than inside the classroom, as well as their impressions related to one class where they were purposely separated from their respective facilitator. Finally, I have examined 12 facilitator reports, consisting of their considerations and depiction of their experience as such; inquired by professor Mariotti herself, the report consisted of a series of questions, part of which was formulated on the basis of Arleoni (2017).

Findings 1: The facilitator as a figure who provides validation

Although indirectly, some students (14 out of 44) have pointed out a connection between their relationship with the facilitator and the need for validation. It is possible to assume that these students have interpreted the presence of the facilitator as a 'regulator' of their interactions, thus overlooking the possibility of learning from him/her. For example, guidance in fostering communication among the participants has been misunderstood as a behavior characteristic of the facilitator only (Japanese to English, my translation):

> When the facilitator helps us, he/she *makes sure* everyone is talking and that we state our opinion. […] As he/she wasn't present (today), I feel like this class has been *unfruitful*.
> (Student B.'s comment on April 1st, 2019 class without facilitators; emphasis added by the author)

Validation can be conceived as a positive emotion. However, in cases such as this, it can be argued that students were looking up to the facilitators in order to receive confirmation; relying heavily on facilitator approval, this student has expressed confusion when he/she had to face the activity alone, lacking understanding in why the facilitator had been taken away from the group. Moreover, it is important here to highlight the fact that this student didn't express to have missed the facilitator and his/her individuality as a member of the group, but he/she simply stated regret due to his/her absence. Thus, the facilitator is here seen in a merely instrumental perspective, as someone who has a very precise role: regulating student interactions and leading the development of the group. As these characteristics are believed not to be shared or

acquired by the students, the facilitator being absent from the group results in impressions of unproductiveness.

Findings 2: The facilitator as a figure of authority

A minority of students (3 out of 44) demonstrated to have developed an even more stiffened relationship with their facilitator, reinforcing its conceptualization as a regulator in "authority": in these circumstances, students would experience uneasiness not only in interacting with their facilitator, but also with other teammates, as they expected their actions and achievements to be judged positively or negatively. Until now, the presence of the facilitator inside the group has been argued as beneficial because it helps to bridge the gap between students and teacher, thus mediating learners direct confrontation with the figure in charge for the educational activity; however, students relating to facilitators in terms of an "authority" experienced the idea of being 'tested' by them (Italian to English, my translation):

> I perceive our facilitators as an *authority*, so *I feel like I need to maintain a certain level of Japanese proficiency (when I talk) with them*. […] However, I still feel like they are needed to manage the activity and discussion.(Student C.'s comment on April 1st, 2019 class without facilitators; emphasis added by the author)

In this case, the peer-like relationship between student and facilitator is subverted and turned into subordination to the facilitator, to the point of experiencing the same difficulties in communication that could have arouse between students and the teacher, because of learner apprehension of being judged in their abilities and performance. Regardless of facilitators' proficiency in the target language, this student still experienced uneasiness due to his/her thematization of the facilitator as a 'mini-teacher', and possibly, a referee of the main teacher in the course; this would explain the difficulties experienced in relating with him/her.

The majority of students (3 out of 4; 1 unknown) in my group have shown similar hardships in creating a meaningful relationship with their facilitators, due to their perception of my role as their teammate. Communicating or answering questions in the target language posed by the facilitator proved to be a major obstacle for students experiencing little self-confidence in their abilities; especially when engaging in dialogue with me, being a facilitator with the same background as them, students wouldn't put much effort in addressing or replying to me in Japanese, but would rather switch to our shared native language: this as an attempt of avoiding the possibility of being challenged or judged due to their proficiency in target language.

Still, they also confirmed to perceive the facilitator as a figure who gives orders and makes decisions inside the group: in fact, students would engage with me as a substitute of the teacher, reaching out for me whenever they needed clarification and asking me for confirmation about both major and minor aspects of class activity, thus taking for granted that I could provide better 'understanding' of what was happening in the course and thus relying on me as an 'instructor' rather than a facilitator. In these terms, my presence turned into a restriction of students' responsibility of thinking for themselves and giving their own interpretation of the course.

Findings 3: Students' quest for autonomy

In their comments relating to experiencing the course by themselves, some students (13 out of 44) showed having implicitly questioned their reliance on the facilitator. Once again, what emerges here is a contextualization of the facilitator as a regulator, if not a leader of group activities:

> Last week, we carried out the activity without our facilitator. *I started thinking freely.* […] Facilitators may not know the aim of the course 100%, but their questions really help. Therefore, if facilitators won't be with us anymore from now on, *we have to start to carry out the activity as they do*. (Student D.'s comment on April 1st, 2019 class without facilitators; emphasis added by the author)

In the above comment, a student inadvertently realizes not to have been able to fully take his responsibility as a member of the group into his own hands until then due to the presence of the facilitator; but, he/she was able to develop such awareness of his/her situation only in the moment where he/she found him/herself alone with other students (who are, again, here considered as the sole peers, contrary to the facilitator). The reliance on the facilitator here is consolidated to the point that this student has realized his active role inside the group (i.e. the opportunity of elaborating his perspective with others through dialogue; the ability of deciding for himself and discussing possibilities with teammates) as he/she had to face the activity by him/herself.

Lack of autonomy determined by the presence of facilitators has been found also in students who have claimed having created a very positive relationship with them. Although declaring of considering the facilitator as a teammate, there is a discrepancy in its depiction compared to peer-students, as the facilitator is considered a guide rather than a peer (Italian to English, my translation):

> […] we have missed each other, because we have experienced *the absence of a guide* and because we consider them part of our group. On a side, this class could have been *an opportunity to develop our own autonomy*, but I could see how some members of my group were feeling lost, *as if they couldn't understand the significance of the absence of facilitators*.
> (Student D.'s comment on April 1st, 2019 class without facilitators; emphasis added by the author)

While this student criticized the behavior of his/her peers, deeming it as passive, he/she also admitted his/her group dependence on the facilitator, who is here described as a "guide". Thus, despite the alternance in relationship dynamics, students prove to struggle in managing themselves on their own, and they turn to the facilitator as a figure other than students, who are seen as the 'pillar' of the activity.

Findings 4: Facilitators' perception of themselves

Finally, when asked about their understanding of their presence as participants to the activity, the majority of facilitators (9 out of 12; 1 unknown) legitimated it with the assumption that students would find themselves more at ease when interacting with peers rather than with the teachers. In this case, we can find alignment between

facilitators' perception of themselves and the concept of facilitators as useful to the course in order to engage with the students (Italian to English, my translation):

> As a facilitator, I could experience *how students prefer interacting with someone who is on a 'peer-level'* instead than with the teacher.(Facilitator A.'s final report, handed in on May 5th, 2019; emphasis added by the author)

However, this statement proves to be in contradiction with students' admitted perception of the facilitators inside their groups, as the latter was ultimately contextualized as closer to a guide, and therefore to a teacher figure, rather than to a peer-student. Misalignment between such impression and students' has also to be found in students' reaction to facilitators being excluded from the evaluation process; in this case, one of the facilitators could perceive students' confusion and dissatisfaction in witnessing facilitators not taking active role in this part of the activity (Japanese to Italian, my translation):

> As a facilitator, I haven't participated in the discussion about the evaluation criteria. As I wasn't expressing my opinion about it, student F. told me: "*This is not fair*. You are a student too, so please say something".(Facilitator B.'s final report, handed in on May 7th, 2019; emphasis added by the author)

In this case, facilitator non-participation to the evaluation process resulted in an obstacle in creating a balance between them and students, as it accentuated or gave shape to the idea of facilitators as 'external' participants, who aren't as fully involved in the course as students. As it affects students' material achievement in their degree course as marks, being excluded from receiving judgement is believed to have contributed to creating a power relationship between students and facilitators.

Discussion: Socially positioning the 'peer-facilitator'

Reviewing previous literature related to general and language education, it was possible to observe how it converges on a thematization of the facilitator as a guide, a director and a support to the student in order to navigate responsibly and autonomously and pave their own, individual way through the object of learning (Morrison, 2014; Caon, 2017; Arleoni, 2017); mediation in these terms brings on fulfilment and satisfaction for the student in pursuing their learning achievement (Umeda, 2005; Balboni, 2014). As these same conditions applied, based on the findings considered in this research I believe it is safe to say that the facilitators for the course above considered as a case study successfully managed to mediate students' expectations towards this activity; proving to be relatable as a guide, the facilitator bolsters learner adjustment to the novelty of the course approach, mitigating its induced uneasiness (Hosokawa & Kabaya eds., 2008).

This is as far as uneasiness towards the activity is concerned; however, the same cannot be said in the case of the expectations towards facilitators. Despite being a peer, the facilitator is still subject to the scrutiny of the students, as he/she provides a channel for them to seek for validation inside the learning environment, much like the teacher. Thus, while the relationship gap between students and teachers can be potentially be bridged by the involvement of facilitators, consistent disparity among student perception and assumptions on facilitators and vice versa impacts negatively

on the interpersonal relationships among participants, as well as on the framework and aims of the course.

It is not the inherent presence of peer-facilitators inducing tension and uneasiness in the students; as showed in the findings, only some among the learners have related to their facilitators as figure of marked authority, potentially disrupting the equilibrium inside the group, while the majority had still managed to positively connect with their facilitator. In fact, I would like to state that the rift among students and peer-facilitators has to be found in the way they are socially positioned by learners into the learning activity. By envisioning the students as a guide and relying on them in this sense, students haven't developed awareness of the facilitator as a participant, but as a substitute of the teacher; the consequences echo on the development of the course, as they are unable to fully fulfil their autonomy and responsibility in thinking for themselves.

The student-facilitators gap is sustained by self-perceived inadequacy of the students in their target language abilities (Alessandrini, 2020), which causes them not only to rely on facilitators as considered as more proficient, but also to experience tension as they believe to be evaluated negatively by a figure in power related to the teacher. In this perspective, students feel inadequate to engage with others in interactions, even though testing foreign language abilities is not included among the aims of the course. Furthermore, partial involvement in the course (i.e. not participating in the report writing or evaluation process) by the facilitators greatly weighs on students' perception of them as participants, as it contributes to the abridgement of identity questioning on both sides. The first entailing the development and statement of their personal opinion, and the second expressing judgment over it, the two activities prove to be two crucial in the formation of emotional connection among participants, which fails to arise in the moment only one side is involved. Thus, students and facilitators eventually believe to be unevenly positioned inside the learning environment, although the course approach has attempted to place them in an egalitarian relationship.

Conclusion: Unavoidable gap?

As mutual involvement has proven to be crucial in creating the conditions so that students and facilitators can relate to each other on an emotional level, practical suggestions on the organization and execution of such dialogical language education for the future regard the involvement of all participants in all the activities of the course. This considered, my hope is for the results of this research to contribute in calling into question the 'guiding' figure in language education, as a presence who is supposed to be on the side of the student, but which doesn't necessarily succeed on establishing a meaningful relationship on a pedagogical perspective.

While the switch from teacher to facilitator, and from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach has been successful, I believe a further shift to be required for non-discriminating, boundary-crossing language education to flourish. Defining facilitators as they are introduced to the students may constitute a problem itself, as it adds a new, unknown figure in the learning environment, a previously external presence who eventually ends up being framed in a role that is other than the students; who can become an ally to them, but still isn't recognized as a peer, because it is

positioned by learners as a member of a hierarchical teaching and learning system, which still presents the teacher and 'guides' on its upper level, and students on the bottom.

As a former student and a facilitator for this course myself, I walked in the classroom and met the students with the best intentions: I truly wanted to be of some help to them, to sit in class and make use of the precious time we shared in order to think together about what is the most meaningful to us, to meet our views and laying the foundation for respectful dialogue; however, both the students and I struggled in getting over our established roles in the learning environment. Seemingly unavoidable in the present time, I believe the gap between students and facilitators can go through relevant changes if we decide to focus on the promotion of democracy and citizenship formation as the purpose of language education, as suggested by the principles of important language policies in the world (Council of Europe, 2001), dismantling the principle of language proficiency levels-based activities as suggested by the instance of language education researched in this study: becoming progressively aware of the boundaries underlying our learning system, and walking together towards more inclusive, critical language pedagogy.

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