This is a pre-print of an article to be published in May 2021. See Pearce, D.R. (2021). 「なにネイティブ？」An analytic autoethnography of a plurilingual language teacher in Japan. *JALT Bilingualism SIG Special Commemorative Monograph* (Monograph 19), for the original.

「なにネイティブ？」An Analytic Autoethnography of a Plurilingual Language Teacher in Japan

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1.1 Prologue

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" I think to myself, sitting under the extractor fan in my apartment, whisky in one hand, cigarette in the other – falling back into some unhealthy habits. I feel paralyzed, wanting to move forward, but feeling pulled in all other directions. And I feel afraid. I take another sip. The haze creeping forward from the base of my skull begins to envelop me, and I know I'm not going to find any answers tonight.

This was my second semester of my first full-time teaching position at a university.

"We are concerned with the amount of Japanese you are using in class," a superior had told me a few days earlier, "we are trying to make courses that emulate what it is like overseas, so you should use as much English as possible." It's still my first year, and I certainly don't want to make a bad impression. I need this job. But something didn't sit right with me. My experiences as a bilingual teacher and researcher, as well as a student of education, had irrevocably changed me. I wasn't sure that I could play 'the monolingual' anymore.

Troubled by my colleagues' perceptions of me, that same day I had spoken with another superior, who told me, "oh yeah, we're aware of your Japanese use. We don't think it's a problem, though." Somewhat encouraged, but nevertheless still confused, I puffed away at my cigarette while the melting ice clinked against the side of the glass.

Well, no one ever said that this job would be easy.

1.2 A Liminal Autoethnography

The perception of the native speaker as the ideal language model, and therefore, the ideal language teacher, has come under fire in the last few decades, and plurilingual (or translingual) practices are becoming more prevalent, even in traditional TESOL discourse (e.g., Galante et al., 2020; Marshall & Moore, 2018). However, native-speakerism continues to exert influence on foreign language education (FLE) through practice such as English-only. This is also true in the Japanese context, in which, while pluri/translingual theory and practice are beginning to gain traction (see, for instance, Nishiyama, 2017; 大山、2016; Moore et al., 2020a; Turnbull, 2018), native-speakerism still continues to impact not only FLE practice in the classroom, but also teacher hiring, and how bilingual practitioners represent themselves as professionals (Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018; ピアース、2021).

While there has been a growing body of literature on issues of native-speakerism in Japan, and autoethnographical accounts of practitioners' experiences within this paradigm are becoming more prevalent (see, for instance, Part 1 of Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018), they are, perhaps unsurprisingly, dominated by accounts of non-native speaking teachers. It is my intention with this

short autoethnography to further challenge the discourse of native-speakerism through a slightly less common lens: that of the native speaker of English.

As a teacher/researcher in FLE in the Japanese context, my aim with this paper is to link my personal experiences to the issue of native-speakerism in Japanese FLE, in order to critique native-speakerism as potentially damaging not only to non-native practitioners, but also native speakers, who appear ostensibly to be 'benefactors' of the ideology.

Raised as a monolingual speaker of English, who achieved bilingualism during adulthood, and now publishes in both Japanese and English, educated both in my home country of New Zealand, and Japan, but trained as a teacher and researcher in the latter, I constantly occupy a liminal zone between, perhaps not the native/non-native[1], but certainly the Japanese/non-Japanese. It is this liminality that weaves through my autoethnography and drives my critique of native-speakerism.

A strength of autoethnography lies in bringing a researcher's lived experiences and emotions into the discourse, and those are what I will primarily refer to in this paper. It has been pointed out, however, that "autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption" (Anderson, 2006, p. 385). Thus, I will attempt to restrict my recollections (and emotions) to those that I feel can contribute to the ongoing probing for a 'post-native-speakerist future' (Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018), and will attempt to do so in an "engaged but dispassionate way" (Wall, p. 6).

1.3 Emergent Bilingualism

In order to contextualize the brief episodes that will follow, it is necessary here to give a short autobiography. My first encounter with the Japanese language was far back in 2004, as my chosen major at the University of Auckland. A while after graduating, I found myself landing at Shonai Airport in Yamagata prefecture, a newly hired assistant language teacher (ALT) on the JET Programme (CLAIR, 2020).

This was my first experience of (knowingly) being in a privileged position – I had little background in language teaching (although I did have a minor in linguistics), but here I was, in a foreign country, with a well-paid job, simply because I was a native-English speaker. I also remember feeling embarrassed that my own language learning had not been what I considered successful, and that my Japanese was woefully insufficient.

In a language teaching position, and with a major in Japanese, I felt I needed to address this lack of linguistic ability. Outside of my ALT hours, I devoted myself to study, often spending upwards of four hours a day, and obtained level 1 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test in 2009. Not yet satisfied that I 'knew enough Japanese,' I continued to apply myself, sitting the Japan Kanji Aptitude Test alongside my students, eventually achieving level pre-1 in 2011.

As my ALT term was drawing to a close, I began to reflect on my experiences with Japanese learning and English teaching, and relationships with my students and colleagues. It was at this late stage that I decided to pursue a long-term career in language education. I applied to a masters' programme at Kyoto University, during which time I was intent on obtaining my teacher's license.

[1] The concept of the native speaker is an empty idea, pedagogically speaking, as Davies (2003) points out that the only criteria for being a native speaker is temporal, with no standards for competence. *Native-speakerism*, on the other hand, is defined by Holliday as the "belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" (2006, p.385).

1.4 Becoming a Plurilingual Practitioner

1.4.1 Bilingual Now?

"So, as a bilingual, what unique contribution do you think you can make to language education in Japan?" Late in the afternoon, sometime in September 2014, I was sitting on the bank of Kamogawa River in Kyoto, sipping a beer and reflecting on the interview section of my entrance examination, which had finished not an hour earlier.

"He called me bilingual…" I thought to myself, reflecting on a question put to me by one of the Japanese professors, "have I done it? Am I bilingual now?" I didn't feel 'complete,' as I thought I would, but here I was, recognized by a *native speaker of Japanese*, and a professor of educational linguistics to boot, as 'bilingual.' I wouldn't come to realize it until a few years later, but I was evaluating my bilingualism through a monolingual lens; looking at myself as a monolingual English speaker, still adding to a second, incomplete, Japanese monolingual self. I did not feel at liberty to define my own bilingualism, and constantly compared myself to a nebulous, imagined native-Japanese speaker.

Although I was unaware at the time, the idea of bilingualism as two-monolinguals-in-one had already been challenged in bilingual research since before I was born (see Grosjean, 1989). The reality of bilingualism is much more complex, and well beyond the scope of this short paper, although is adequately summarized by what bilingual researcher François Grosjean calls the 'complementarity principle,' i.e., that "bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Different aspects of life often require different languages" (Grosjean, 2010, p. 29).

In fact, my subsequent study for my teacher's license[2], as well as work towards my master's degree, would entail classes and discussions conducted entirely in Japanese (although with writing in both languages). This would see me developing certain domains, particularly academic domains, with stronger Japanese than my native English. This rings true today, as a research colleague pointed out to me while I discussed this very article with her (my present-day language domains are also shown in Figure 1, below):

> It was funny seeing you present in English last year – you were so much more nervous than when you present in Japanese…less of a "what native are you?" feeling, but that you really operate in different *domains*… in that domain, your Japanese is much stronger. Not a question of being native, but just, you're bilingual (Research colleague, personal phone call, November 2020).

[2] For which I have completed all of the required credits, course work, and practicums, but as I am reminded writing this paper, I haven't yet made my way to the local Board of Education to apply for the license itself.

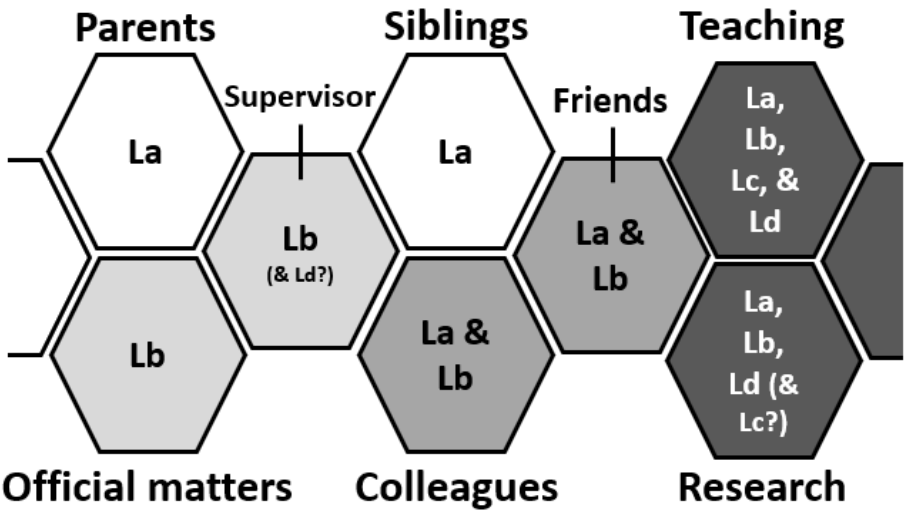

Figure 1. A snapshot of my bilingual domains (inspired by Grosjean, 2010, p.30).

In 2014 however, and for several years afterwards, I would continue to hold that imagined native-Japanese speaker as a standard, and negatively evaluate my own bilingualism. Part of this was due, of course, to the fact that I was pursuing a degree in a field heavily influenced by the discourse of the linguistic-cognitive view in mainstream TESOL, which regards language as homogenous and static. Under the linguistic-cognitive view, the target language is seen as that used by an idealized monolingual native-speaker, and other languages as interferences; a view sometimes labelled 'the monolingual bias'. In other words, "bi/multilingualism [is treated] as a form of individual aberration and bi/multilingual learners as deficient in relation to monolinguals" (May, 2014, p.20). "Yet," I thought, "isn't bilingualism what we are trying to foster in our learners?"

Reflection on my reality as a bilingual was beginning to contradict this view (recall the conversation above, in which my second language was stronger than my first). Having now spent the majority of my adult life in Japan, and much of my private life in Japanese, I identified as not only bilingual, but also bicultural[3]. Still, the question from my entrance exam remained; as a bilingual, what could *I* offer?

1.4.2 Through Bilingualism to Plurilingualism

In early 2019, I began writing a PhD on a topic I would eventually abandon, although the draft gives some insight into my thoughts on the native/non-native divide at the time:

> …in my life [through both studying and working] at Japanese universities, something odd struck me. *Having the personal belief that the purpose of language learning is to communicate with those of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds*, what struck me was not only odd, but somewhat alarming. […] Wherever I went, the same phenomenon was occurring amongst language teachers […]. On breaks, in hallways, leaving campus… in their downtime, the Japanese teachers of language and those of foreign heritage kept

[3] Space precludes a thorough consideration of my identity as bicultural. Nevertheless, it impacts my experiences as a practitioner and is thus important to mention.

> mostly to themselves. In break rooms for part-timers, there was always a clear divide – foreign teachers sat and talked with foreign teachers, Japanese with Japanese (exceptions existed, of course!). And I wondered to myself, '*what makes it so difficult for us, those who are professionals in language teaching, in the same language, to talk to each other*?' (abandoned PhD dissertation introduction, February 2019, emphasis added)

Clearly, there was more going on than just language. Wishing to discover more about what had made me a 'successful' language learner, and the underlying competences necessary for communication, I was increasingly drawn to the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, defined as follows:

> Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social actor has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the social actor may draw (Coste, Moore & Zarate 2009[1997], p. 11).

Sometime after this, I had a conversation about Grosjean's work on bilingualism with a former ALT colleague, who adroitly pointed out that "Grosjean recognizes that bilingualism is typically an environmental problem, not an educational one." I was cognizant of the fact my learners had varying trajectories, and that many would not, in fact, become bilinguals.[4] At any rate, they would certainly never become English monolinguals! I began to think about how the concept of plurilingualism might be applied to my classroom, and the competences I might help foster in my learners, how I might contribute to their learning, whether they would eventually become bilingual or not.

1.5 When Plurilingualism meets the Monolingual Bias

Just beginning to establish a professional identity as a 'plurilingual practitioner,' I began work at my present institution full-time in April 2019. Around this time, I was also becoming aware that trans/plurilingual theory and practice were beginning to burgeon within the Japanese literature. It was appearing in public school practice (岩坂・吉村、2011; Moore et al., 2020b), some of which I was involved in personally (Oyama & Pearce, 2019), in teacher training (大山、2019; 吉村・ヤング、2016), and even in tertiary-level instruction (Nishiyama, 2017; Oyama & Yamamoto, 2020; Turnbull, 2018). I felt bolstered by this trend, and slightly surer of the approach I would be taking to the classroom.

Nevertheless, I was keenly aware of the persistence of native-speakerism in education in Japan. Native-speakerism was still prevalent in the ALT system of which I was formerly a part, which, if not explicitly discriminatory in hiring practices, at least continues to describe ALTs as

[4] Here again, borrowing Grosjean's (2010) definition of bilinguals: "those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives" (p. 4)

monolingual native English speakers (ピアース, 2021), in hiring practices at the tertiary level[5], and in the minds of some colleagues and students (Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018). Native-speakerism would end up causing me some headaches.

1.5.1 "Us Natives"

One lunchtime in late July 2019, I had just finished teaching a reading class, and was meeting a colleague for lunch in the cafeteria. After a brief discussion of the morning's classes, I was aghast at what he said next… "it's better if us native teachers do our own thing, and not involve the Japanese. Things just go smoother that way."

I cannot recall the response I gave, although it was certainly non-committal. I was not going to argue; I had only been at the university for less than a semester, and I was not about to rock the boat. But I did not agree. How could I? I had spent most of my adult life in Japan, and most of that with Japanese colleagues. I had been educated in a Japanese university, and considered myself both bilingual and bicultural. In many ways, I shared more commonalities with my Japanese colleagues than I did with other native-speaking teachers of different backgrounds. And yet, here I was, despite my background and experience, assumed to belong ideologically to a group simply because I shared a (different variety) of native tongue. Whatever other experiences made up my identity were apparently inconsequential.

Here was native-speakerism at work. The "belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" (Holliday, 2006, p. 385), I was assumed to embody. Yet I did not share the same 'Western culture' as my colleagues (the *pounamu* adorning my chest attested to that), my English was of a different variety, and my language teaching methodology was informed not only by TESOL literature, but by Japanese scholarship, my teacher training, and by plurilingual literature and practice primarily from the Francosphere. At any rate, I still believed that 'the purpose of language learning is to communicate with those of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds,' and I was certainly not willing to impose an apartheid on myself into a monolingualized 'native' group.

That evening I found myself under my extractor fan. The mix of peaty whisky and tobacco smoke giving me a nice burn at the back of my throat, although it somehow lacked the familiar warmth.

"Was I going to fit in at this university? Was I going to have to portray myself as monolingual?" But I wasn't monolingual. I felt that I had much more to share if I was able to make use of my entire repertoire – English, Japanese, and the experiences I had garnered through some study of Te Reo Māori, and in reading French literature for my research. I was still afraid, however. Having used up what meagre savings I had over the last few years as a graduate student, I needed this job, and thought it probably safer to toe the line.

Native-speakerism, an ideology that on the surface should have benefited me, would continue to cause me stress for the foreseeable future. However, I also felt that hiding away my linguistic ability would be disingenuous, and a detriment to my students. "After all," I thought, "isn't it a good thing to show that bilingualism goes both ways?"

[5] I had one experience of the 'other side' of native-speakerism, in which a colleague recommended me to take over for a part-time class on English presentations, to which I was turned down because the institution wanted a native Japanese speaking teacher. C'est la vie!

1.6 Conclusion and Implications

In this autoethnography I have attempted to use my personal experience to develop a better understanding of conflicts that can emerge when a binary labelling of native/non-native is applied to bilingual (or plurilingual) language teaching professionals.

Much of the early debate on nativism was dominated by representations presented to learners, or inherent teacher traits, from a binary native/non-native perspective (e.g., Medgyes, 1992). More recent work has rejected this binary view, and is cognizant of the diversity in linguistic experience and repertoires of language teaching professionals (for instance, Houghton & Hashimoto, 2018). Much of this expanded literature remains told through the voices of non-native speaking practitioners – an unsurprising (albeit welcome) phenomenon, given that native-speakerism tends to disproportionately disenfranchise non-native speakers. I hope that this autoethnography has in some way helped to show that native-speakerism can disenfranchise native speakers as well.

While post-native-speakerism is steadily growing both in research and in practice, through plurilingual (e.g., Marshall & Moore, 2018) and translingual (e.g., Turnbull, 2018) discourse, native-speakerism will likely remain with us for some time. Part of this may be due to its long history in second language acquisition and TESOL research – it is difficult to upturn 'established knowledge' in a field (May, 2014). Nevertheless, it is important to continue to point out the futility of the binary native/non-native label, and continue to probe for a post-native-speakerist future, both for the benefit of ourselves as bilingual practitioners, and for our learners, who have increasingly uncertain and varied trajectories in an increasingly diversifying world.

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