

JAPAN

Linguistic Challenges and Possibilities of Immigrants In Case of Nikkei Brazilians in Japan

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1. Introduction

The 2006 immigration and naturalization census showed the record-breaking figure of 2.08 million foreigners (1.63% of the total population) in Japan, including 312,979 Nikkei Brazilians. This represents a nine-fold increase over the last ten years due, in part, to a new law enacted in June 1990 that allows Nikkei (Japanese descendents) and their spouses to work in Japan (Tsuda 2003). More than half of the 312, 979 Nikkei Brazilians live in several prefectures such as Aichi, Shizuoka, and Gunma, where many subcontractors for large companies are located.

Hamamatsu City in Shizuoka Prefecture has the largest number of Nikkei Brazilians. My genuine surprise to find a large community of Nikkei Brazilian in my hometown motivated me to investigate Nikkei Brazilians and their educational views further. In order to show several factors that affect Nikkei Brazilians' educational choices for their children, I will first discuss Japanese ideologies affecting non-Japanese and I will then describe the current social and educational situations of Brazilian immigrants in Japan. Ultimately, I hope to enhance our understanding of the complex demography of Nikkei Brazilians, and call for socio-political awareness including working toward coexistence (kyosei) among educators and practitioners.

2. Japanese Ideologies Affecting Non-Japanese

2.1 Ideologies toward Nationalism

The Meiji government's Datsua nyūō (Escape Asia, Enter Europe) slogan began immediately after Japan opened the country in 1868. This policy reflected the Japanese government objective that Japan would catch up with the West militarily and become 'modernized', which reinforced the language and ethnic assimilation policies against Asian people, and eventually the mono-ethnic myth (Lie 2001). This ideology of homogeneity helped create the concepts of pure (blooded) ethnicity and 'true Japanese', which led many Japanese to believe in the importance of bloodline and Nihonjinron

(Murphy-Shigematsu 2003). Nihonjinron is essentially an ethnocentric concept that defines Japanese people and culture as unique based on the premise that Japanese people are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogeneous (Knower 2000).

2.2 Ideologies toward Internationalism

While some Japanese continue to believe in their uniqueness and cultural superiority in the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese government was pressured to integrate more fully into the global community (Kubota 2002). Thus, in response to foreign pressure, the Japanese government promoted the concept of “internationalization” and the decision was made to hire several thousand foreign teachers of English for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program as a test case for top-down internationalization (McConnell 2000).

Indeed, there is a commonly held and deeply rooted view in Japan that foreigner equals American, and American equals an English-speaking, white, modern person (Sekiguchi 2003). This tendency to equate ethnicity with nationality affected the Japanese government’s postwar naturalization policies and resulted in the establishment of a new immigration law in 1990 (Cary 2001). Therefore, although the new law granted Nikkei Brazilians a new type of visa emphasizing their bloodline, in many cases, Japanese treat them as culturally and ethnically distinct rather than as individuals of Japanese descent (DeCarvalho, 2003).

2.3 Japanese Language Planning

In Japan, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has controlled virtually every aspect of public education. As for language planning, MEXT has implemented various reforms such as writing styles and the simplification and/or standardization of Chinese characters (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003). MEXT has also taken various measures to promote English in junior high schools and recently in elementary schools. However, they have applied only to Japanese nationals or students in Japanese school systems. For Japanese nationals, school attendance is mandatory until the third year of junior high school. Foreign nationals are allowed but not required to send their children to Japanese public schools. However, the medium of instruction, regardless of the student’s nationality, is always Japanese.

3. Nikkei Brazilian as Newcomers

3.1 Background Information

Despite being officially translated as immigration and naturalization office in

English, the Japanese government does not actually use the word immigration in government documentation. Historically, the word *imin* (immigrant) was associated with Japanese emigrants who sought economic advancement overseas, in places like Hawaii, South America, and Manchuria rather than Brazilian immigrants who came to Japan. The word *Nikkeijin*, which refers to descendants of Japanese, does not normally refer to ethnically Japanese people in Japan but to overseas Japanese or to members of a migrant society. The word *Nikkeijin* itself is political because they usually do not refer themselves to *Nikkei* unless the word is used in an official or political context (Roth 2002).

With the encouragement of Japanese government there were about 190,000 emigrants in Brazil during the period of 1908 – 1941. With the economic boom in the 1970s and 1980s in Japan, Japanese ceased emigrating, and at around the same time, many non-*Nikkei* and *Nikkei* Brazilians left Brazil for industrialized countries because of a deteriorated economy and relatively low standard of living in Brazil.

3.2 Newcomers' Related Problems

It has only been about 30 years since the presence of foreign workers became a social issue in Japan. Due to the alarming rate of illegal workers, the Japanese government also proposed to revise its Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law in 1989, which passed in 1990 (Tsuda 2003). Because of the difficulty for foreigners in Japan to extend or change their visa status, Roth (2002) interpreted this new law as a way for Japanese companies to use *Nikkeijin* as an attractive alternative to other kinds of foreign labor. Tsuda (2003) argued that the Japanese government did not want to recognize unskilled migrant workers and that the emphasis on bloodline “ideologically justifies” the policy.

Although many municipal governments in these cities have taken special measures to better serve foreign residents they still face many social, psychological, and educational problems.

3.3 Social and Psychological Problems

Some of psychological problems are related to identity issues. Many *Nikkeijin* claim that in Brazil, they are rarely called *Nikkei* but *Japonês*. While in Japan, they refer to themselves as *brasilerio* but are called foreigner (*gaijin*), Brazilian (*burajirujin*), or worse, and are treated as second-class citizens (Linger 2001).

Moreover, if *Nikkei* Brazilian children attend school, they usually become more aware of their foreignness, and are often trapped in a vicious circle. Being singled out

for being foreign and possessing low Japanese language proficiency does not allow them to make many friends, and consequently they cannot get much help from Japanese friends when schoolwork gets harder in junior high school.

3.4 Problems Related to Education

According to MEXT, foreign students who needed special instruction in Japanese numbered 19,678 in 2004 at 5,345 schools. Despite the efforts of the Municipal Boards of Education to provide remedial Japanese lessons and language assistants where Nikkei residents were concentrated, it was reported that 10-30 percent of Nikkei Brazilian children were not attending school.

Strict Japanese school rules, difficult high school entrance examinations, school and dietary differences, miscommunication between Japanese teachers and foreign parents can affect Brazilian parents' decision about their children's educational choices.

4. Brazilian School

Hamamatsu, where this Brazilian school was located, is a middle-sized city situated between Tokyo and Osaka. The spacious geographical surroundings allows for relatively cheap housing compared to the high living costs of bigger cities. Of the total population of 800,000, Brazilians account for 60% of 29,635 non-Japanese, totaling 15,899. Many shops and restaurants display Brazilian national flags, and many signs are in Portuguese. Though people there are considered open-minded, public schools follow traditional views of education and enforce rigid school rules.

This Brazilian school was founded in 1996 and has approximately 100 students. Students go to elementary school between the ages of six and eleven (grades 1-4), junior high between the ages of 11-14 (grades 5-8), and senior high school between the ages of 15-17. Though the present Japanese municipal governments provide many language aids outside of school to the children of immigrants, some Nikkei parents choose to send children to private Portuguese-medium schools that required higher tuition and had less sophisticated school facilities. For example, the Principal at the Brazilian school said he bought an old company dormitory and he himself remodeled and painted the rooms. Behind the main building, there was a small area for volleyball and soccer. This school is accredited by the Brazilian government but not by the Japanese government. They use the same textbooks and adopt the same school system as in Brazil.

4.1 Concerns Related to Education and Language Learning

The parents and teachers that I interviewed expressed some concern about the children's education, particularly the disruptive effects of parents planning to return to Brazil.

The Principal expressed his concerns as follows:

It took ten years to establish this school, but in reality, out of 2,500 Brazilian children under 18 years old, and 1,600 under 15 years old, 500 students are not attending. We provide classes for high school students but they do not come. Parents are planning to go home soon. Children attend this school so that when they go home, they will not have to face problems.

The school provides remedial classes to help any student that falls behind, including basic Portuguese language classes.

The Vice-Principal stated:

Children feel they are at a dead-end. Therefore, the school took all the children to visit colleges and vocational tech school. We also took them to the recycling factory. We collected bottles, took them to this factory, and watched how they were recycled. When they become interested (in things like this), they begin to study. There are only two ways for them, (to become) good or bad.

When they transfer from Japanese schools, some children are stressed out. They are under a lot of pressure and feel that they have nowhere to go. Some have nervous breakdowns. Parents consider their children's feelings before they decided to bring children to this school.

After the children came to this school, their feelings became so bright - they became so happy.

One Brazilian mother who had migrated to the U.S. before coming to Japan commented as follows:

My husband and I decided to send our seven-year-old son to Brazilian school although tuition is quite high for us. We have seen many Brazilian children who can speak Portuguese but cannot read or write, or children who attended Japanese schools but had to transfer to Brazilian schools for various reasons. Since we have seen that many children who are successful in Japanese school usually do not want to go back and won't be happy, we chose Brazilian school over Japanese school to make sure that our

son can read and write Portuguese. My husband and I have already decided to go back to Brazil soon for my son's education.

On a practical side, it is easier to process papers when we transfer our children to schools in Brazil. I had one neighbor who had two children. In the beginning, they had no problem. The older child could speak Portuguese with no trouble, but could not read it. I asked the mother why she did not teach her son how to read and write in Portuguese.

If we knew for sure that we would stay here for ten or 20 years, Japanese school would be the best. Some people still recommend that we send our son to Japanese school because it is cheaper. But we know we cannot buy back what we would lose on my son's education in exchange for some money saved now.

Mr. Kita, a Nikkei worker, expressed regret about his educational background, which he feels is not sufficient in either Portuguese or Japanese. "As for my education, I was in-between. Halfway (Unsatisfactory). This is why I left my children in Brazil. Unfortunately, bouncing between schools had a negative effect on many Nikkei children".

4.2 Opinions Related to the Value of Learning the Japanese Language

Some of the individuals that I interviewed commented about the value of learning Japanese for Nikkei children. For instance, the Vice-Principal stated:

In Brazil, knowing Japanese does not guarantee better jobs. It is not advantageous. Only a few out of every 100 Brazilian immigrants may worry about their children's Japanese abilities in Japan. Parents in their 30's and 40's may feel that they can still work without any knowledge of Japanese. Some start working in a trade in eighth grade (14 years old). Therefore, they feel their children do not need Japanese in that sense.

Now they can get IPC satellite, a 24-hour Brazilian broadcast in Portuguese. Until about five or six years ago, Brazilian children learned Japanese naturally from TV. However, because of the IPC satellite, many do not learn Japanese. Actually, children do not need to know Japanese to get by in their daily lives here.

As far as the parents are concerned, I would say there are only two or three out of 100 parents who would like their children to be competent in Japanese.

4.3 Mother-tongue Maintenance

In the questionnaire I conducted, of the 50 parents, 84% stated that they spoke only or mostly Portuguese to their children. Likewise, 90% of the 88 students reported that they spoke mostly Portuguese at home. When asked whether they would send their children to Japanese public schools if both Portuguese and Japanese were taught there, half of the parents responded affirmatively.

Maintaining their mother tongue, Portuguese, and returning to Brazil soon are two salient factors that play an important role in the parents' decision making. In addition, many parents feel that their children need to have knowledge about content subjects in Portuguese.

5. Concluding Remarks

Though poorly facilitated, at this Brazilian school, everything was there: a Principal and Vice-Principal who cared about children and worried how to financially manage a school; teachers who were enthusiastic about educating students; and children who were lively, noisy, and loved to be with friends and studying in Portuguese, a language they felt comfortable using. I also noticed that the school tried to impart Brazilian values and culture in addition to the school subjects. In other words, teachers in the Brazilian school wanted the best for the students, and wanted to give them hope. The Brazilian and Japanese teachers and administrators as well as parents were all concerned about the children's well-being but were not entirely sure how they could bring it about.

Navigating the details, proposals, and finer points of internationalization remains the true challenge that must be overcome. In Japan, few are surprised when English-speaking parents send their children to international schools taught in English. However, many Japanese seem automatically to assume that Nikkei Brazilians will send their children to Japanese public schools, where good education is provided for all children. Some Japanese people seem to have a hard time understanding that Nikkei Brazilians have a clear choice between Japanese and Brazilian schools for their children's education.

Some researchers and educators in Japan have proposed mother tongue education for minority children, and others have proposed bilingual education in public elementary schools in Japan to better serve minority children (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002). While attempts in this area have been made, much is still in the hands of volunteers, and without the support of official educational policy.

Overall, much more could be done. If the government and Japanese people had more enlightened views about education, such as heritage language maintenance and

additive bilingual education, as well as new laws on immigration, Japan as a host country could give more dreams and hopes to foreign workers as true members of Japanese society.

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