

Prospects of Bilingual Individuals in the Job Market:

Educational Reform for Cultural and Policy-Related Challenges

Erika TAVESA
Temple University, Japan

This study investigates the limited acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market, exploring cultural and policy-related challenges that hinder bilingual people and their integration into society. The importance of bilingualism in the global context is emphasized and the significance of addressing this issue in Japanese society is highlighted. The current language landscape in Japan is discussed to provide an understanding of the linguistic dynamics in the country. The research question focuses on identifying the problems preventing Japanese society, particularly the job market, from fully embracing bilingualism and promoting it as a societal norm. The hypothesis posits that cultural and policy-related challenges are the primary contributors to the limited acceptance of bilingualism. Through interviews with bilingual individuals, the study uncovers cultural challenges such as bilinguals being treated as outcasts, facing stereotypes, limited job opportunities, and restrictive notions of national identity. To address these challenges, the author proposes comprehensive language education reforms, cultural exchange programs, and inclusive language policies that can encourage and recognize bilingualism as a valuable asset for businesses and professionals in Japan. Policy-related challenges include the dominance of the Japanese language, unclear language policies, and a lack of clarity in the definition of bilingualism. The findings have important implications for promoting acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market. By embracing education as a solution, the author recommends increasing exposure to multi-literacy in classrooms, implementing language policy reforms, and advocating for educational reforms. Additionally, the author acknowledges the limitations of the study and suggests avenues for future research to further investigate and address challenges related to bilingualism in Japan's job market. Overall, this research seeks to contribute to the development of a more open-minded and competitive job market in Japan, thereby fostering economic and societal growth.

この研究は、日本の求人市場におけるバイリンガリズムの限定的な受け入れについて調査し、その背後にある文化的および政策に関連する課題に焦点を当てて、バイリンガルの人々とその社会への統合を妨げる要因を探究しています。国際的な文脈でのバイリンガリズムの重要性が強調され、この問題を日本社会で取り組むべき重要な課題として示しています。また、日本の言語環境の現状を議論し、国内の言語の

ダイナミクスを理解するための情報を提供しています。研究の問いは、日本社会、特に求人市場において、バイリンガリズムの完全な受け入れと社会的規範としての促進を妨げる問題を特定することに焦点を当てています。仮説は、文化的小および政策に関連する課題がバイリンガリズムの限定的な受け入れの主要な要因であるというものです。バイリンガルの個人とのインタビューを通じて、文化的な課題（バイリンガルが社会的に排除され、ステレオタイプに直面し、求人機会が限られ、国家アイデンティティの制約的な概念に直面するなど）が明らかにされています。これらの課題に対処するため、筆者は包括的な言語教育改革、文化交流プログラム、および包括的な言語政策を提案し、これによって日本のビジネスと専門家にとってバイリンガリズムを促進し、認識することができるとしています。政策に関連する課題には、日本語の優越性、明確でない言語政策、およびバイリンガリズムの定義の明確さの欠如が含まれています。研究結果は、日本の求人市場におけるバイリンガリズムの受け入れを促進する重要な示唆を提供しています。筆者は解決策として、教育を活用し、授業での多言語スキルの露出を増やし、言語政策改革を実施し、教育改革を提唱しています。さらに、筆者は研究の制約を認識し、今後の調査の方針を示唆しており、日本の求人市場におけるバイリンガリズムに関連する課題をさらに調査し、対処するための可能性について議論しています。全体として、この研究は、日本のより開かれた思考のある競争力のある求人市場の発展に貢献し、経済的小および社会的な成長を促進することを目指しています。

Keywords: haafu, job market, bilingualism, business prospects, Japanese society, racial diversity

In today's increasingly interconnected and globalized world, bilingualism has emerged as a crucial skill, facilitating effective communication and promoting cultural understanding between diverse communities (Wilkinson, 2015). The ability to speak more than one language is not only advantageous for individuals but also plays a vital role in enhancing a nation's competitiveness in the international arena (Butler, 2007). However, despite the evident benefits of bilingualism, Japanese society has faced challenges in fully embracing this linguistic diversity (Brown, 2006; Heinrich, 2012; Sugimoto, 2003). Understanding the factors that contribute to limited acceptance of bilingualism in Japan, particularly within the job market, is of paramount importance to foster an inclusive and thriving society.

The language landscape in Japan provides a unique backdrop for studying bilingualism (Barrs, 2018, 2020). Historically, the emphasis on Japanese as the primary language has led to a sense of reluctance to promote and accept other languages as integral components of the nation's identity (Heinrich, 2012). This prevailing attitude has implications for various sectors, including the job market, where bilingualism is of increasing significance (Butler, 2007).

This study aims to shed light on the challenges hindering the widespread acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market, examining cultural and policy-related barriers. By exploring these impediments, the author endeavors to propose effective strategies to

promote bilingualism and establish it as a societal norm within the context of Japan's job market. The primary research question guiding this study is twofold: What are the problems that prevent Japanese society, particularly the job market, from fully embracing bilingualism? Additionally, how can bilingualism be promoted and accepted as a societal norm, especially in the context of the Japanese job market?

Based on the existing literature and insights gathered from interviews, it is hypothesized that the limited acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market is primarily attributable to cultural and policy-related challenges. These challenges create barriers for individuals seeking to showcase their bilingual abilities and limit the recognition of the immense value bilingualism brings to businesses and professionals in Japan. However, it is suggested that, by implementing comprehensive language education reforms, promoting cultural exchange programs, and adopting inclusive language policies, bilingualism can be encouraged and embraced as a vital asset within the job market, fostering a more competitive and dynamic workforce.

The objectives of the study are, thus, threefold:

1. To identify cultural, educational, and policy-related challenges that hinder the acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market;
2. To explore and propose strategies, based on evidence gathered from interviews and existing literature, that can foster a more inclusive and accepting environment for bilingual individuals within the job market; and
3. To contribute to the advancement of inclusive language policies, comprehensive language education reforms, and cultural exchange programs, ultimately supporting the growth and development of Japan's economy and society.

By conducting a comprehensive analysis of interview data, this research endeavors to offer evidence-based recommendations that will facilitate a more open-minded and competitive job market in Japan, ensuring that bilingualism becomes an integral part of the nation's linguistic landscape. Through these efforts, this study seeks to contribute to the development of a more inclusive society, where linguistic diversity is embraced and celebrated.

Literature Review

What Does the Research Say?

Bilingualism in Japan is a topic of growing importance, especially in the context of an increasingly interconnected global landscape (Butler, 2007). As the significance of language proficiency becomes evident for individuals and societies, understanding the acceptance and challenges of bilingualism in Japan becomes imperative (Heinrich, 2012). Rakuten Research (2016) conducted an online survey, administered between August 5 and 6 in 2016, to gauge perceptions of the English language. The survey involved 1,000 individuals, both men and women, aged between 20 and 69, selected from Rakuten Research's pool of registered monitors, totaling around 2.3 million individuals. The survey findings revealed that approximately 70% of the respondents considered themselves "weak in English," highlighting a prevalent perception of linguistic limitations among the Japanese population. A TOEIC score of 700 is reported by Rakuten Research to be the threshold at which individuals typically perceive themselves as proficient in English, as over 70% of participants who scored 700 or higher on the TOEIC test indicated that they considered themselves proficient in English. Conversely, for those with a score of 699 or lower, over 70% either responded with "unsure / cannot determine" or expressed feeling "inadequate in English (inadequate, very inadequate). This observation shows the significant influence of perceived English language proficiency on individuals' self-assessment and

their willingness to consider themselves proficient in English (Bridgeman et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the survey (Rakuten Research, 2016) unearthed various reasons given by the respondents for the importance of studying English, ranging from expanding horizons and facilitating communication with foreigners to preparing for future overseas travel. Conversely, some respondents saw less significance in English education, citing reasons such as no plans for travel or limited opportunities to interact with foreigners. This aspect resonates with the self-portrayed mono-ethnic, mono-lingual state of Japan, where language assimilation and the *invisibilization* of ethnic groups might have an impact on language attitudes (Yamamoto, 2003).

Language Policies and Education Reforms for Bilingualism in Japan

The promotion of bilingualism has gained significant attention in Japan, particularly in light of the Tokyo Olympics 2020. As the nation seeks to enhance its global standing, fostering an English-speaking population has become a priority (Wilkinson, 2015). Moreover, Japan's desire for change is not limited to the Tokyo Olympics; it extends to broader political and social issues affecting the nation, such as the global economic importance of English and its role as a political platform for Japan. (Butler, 2007). The acknowledgment of the significance of bilingualism has led to a focus on language policies and education reforms in the country.

In the context of education, the exploration of bilingualism begins at the elementary school level. Scholars like Yoshida (2008) have emphasized the importance of introducing foreign languages early in the curriculum to enhance language acquisition and cross-cultural understanding. This approach aligns with the Global 30 initiative (Shimamura, 2013), which aims to internationalize higher education in Japan by fostering bilingual graduates capable of engaging in a globalized world. The Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) and Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) program (McKenzie, 2010) further complement this effort by inviting native English speakers to assist in language instruction and cultural exchange at schools. The integration of such programs into schools in Japan reflects the commitment to exposing students to diverse linguistic and cultural experiences.

While these efforts signify positive steps towards bilingualism, challenges remain. The concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has garnered attention in the field of language education internationally (Block, 2010). However, some educators have advocated for ELF as an aspirational standard. Critics argue that setting unrealistic expectations for achieving native-like fluency in English may deter individuals from pursuing bilingualism or fully embracing their unique linguistic identity (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This underscores the need for balanced language policies and education reforms that promote both English proficiency and the appreciation of multilingualism.

Challenges, Prevalence, and Benefits of Bilingualism in the Japanese Context

In Japan, embracing bilingualism faces significant challenges, with language homogeneity being one of it. This perception can downplay the importance of languages other than Japanese and bilingualism and create a preference for monolingualism in certain contexts. Consequently, it can marginalize bilingual individuals, reinforcing the idea that Japanese is the primary language and overshadowing the value of multilingualism in society. Heinrich (2012) sheds light on how Japanese society has historically prioritized the use of the Japanese language, resulting in limited exposure to and appreciation for other languages. This emphasis on linguistic uniformity may discourage individuals from actively pursuing bilingualism and exploring alternative linguistic identities. Adding to this, the concept of

nihonjinron, as highlighted by Sugimoto (2003), further reinforces Japan's self-perception as a mono-ethnic, mono-lingual state, perpetuating the invisibilization of ethnic groups and linguistic assimilation. *Nihonjinron*, in essence, is a prevailing belief or discourse in Japanese society emphasizing the uniqueness and homogeneity of the Japanese identity, often depicting Japan as a mono-ethnic and mono-lingual nation where the people share a common culture, ethnicity, and language (Suzuki, 2015). This notion asserts that Japan fundamentally differs from other nations, fostering the perception of cultural and linguistic purity within the country.

Moreover, Brown (2006) discusses a cultural reluctance to self-praise, which may manifest in language learners' hesitance to embrace and express their bilingual abilities confidently. The Japanese cultural value of humility and modesty can inadvertently hinder individuals from acknowledging and celebrating their bilingual proficiency, potentially leading to a lack of motivation in language learning endeavors. In addition to cultural challenges, Bloomfield (1985) explores Japan's perception of bilingualism, emphasizing the societal expectation of being "native-like" in both languages. This notion sets a high standard for bilingualism, creating unrealistic expectations that only native-level proficiency is acceptable. Such rigid beliefs may cause individuals with functional bilingual abilities to undervalue their language skills, leading to a potential reluctance to identify as bilinguals.

However, despite the challenges that Japan faces in embracing bilingualism, there is evidence that active *translanguaging* is prevalent in Japanese society (Turnbull, 2019). Translanguaging refers to the practice of fluidly using multiple languages, often within the same conversation or context (García & Wei, 2014). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Japan's linguistic landscape (Barrs, 2018, 2020; Rowland, 2013), where diverse linguistic expressions are displayed in public spaces, indicating an open and flexible language environment (Barrs, 2018). This environment provides incidental exposure to multiple languages, which can significantly contribute to language learning and enhance bilingual competence (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). This shows that despite the broader societal challenges, the existence of translanguaging and the promotion of linguistic diversity through the linguistic landscape suggest a potential avenue for encouraging and accepting bilingualism in Japan. Opposing the view of bilingualism as being "native-like" in both languages (Bloomfield, 1985), García and Wei (2014) challenge the notion of perfect bilingualism, considering it to be a mere social construct. Instead, they propose that bilingual individuals have a single, expanded linguistic repertoire that encompasses all elements of the named languages in which they hold multicompetence. In their perspective, bilingualism is not confined to achieving flawless proficiency in two separate languages, but rather involves a dynamic and interconnected linguistic ability that allows for seamless language use across various contexts.

The benefits of bilingualism have been extensively researched, revealing its positive impact on various aspects of individual development and societal growth. To begin with, McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004) explains that bilingualism is a skill that fosters critical literary skills, enhancing language learners' ability to think critically and analyze information from different perspectives. This cognitive advantage allows bilingual individuals to approach problems and ideas from diverse linguistic angles, leading to a deeper understanding of complex issues. Moreover, bilingual individuals often exhibit improved pragmatic components, such as sensitivity to context and effective communication in various social settings (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003). The ability to navigate and adjust language use based on the situation contributes to successful interpersonal interactions and promotes cross-cultural understanding (Cenoz & Gorter, 2008). In addition to enhancing linguistic and communicative abilities, bilingualism contributes to

the development of multimodal literacy skills (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). In today's digitally connected world, individuals encounter diverse forms of communication, including written, visual, and digital mediums (Jewitt, 2009). Bilinguals can effectively engage with these various modes of expression, enabling them to excel in diverse linguistic contexts and adapt to different communication platforms. Bilingualism stimulates one's multi-competence, extending its benefits beyond language proficiency. By developing cognitive flexibility and adaptability, bilingual individuals can excel in different areas, such as problem-solving, creativity, and intercultural competence (Cook, 1992). These broader competencies contribute to personal growth and open up various opportunities for success in an interconnected global society (Block, 2010).

Previous Studies on Bilingualism and Japanese Job Markets

Previous research on the impact of bilingualism on businesses and the job market in Japan has uncovered several important insights. One significant finding is the phenomenon of individuals feeling compelled to position themselves as "international" bilinguals (Yoshida, 2014). In a job market that highly values language skills, bilingual individuals often showcase their abilities to boost their employability and professional image, as shown later in this research. This strategic approach allows them to stand out among other job seekers and potentially secure more desirable job opportunities. However, it is paradoxical that, even though English skills are highly prized, they often face social exclusion within their community. Moreover, studies have indicated that bilingual professionals in Japan tend to display a strong sense of confidence while navigating the job market. For instance, a study conducted by the recruitment company Robert Walters (JCN Newswire, 2012) among sales and marketing professionals found that those with bilingual proficiency feel more self-assured in their job search and career advancement prospects than their monolingual peers. Bilingualism is often regarded as a valuable asset, especially in industries with international connections, opening up doors for enhanced job opportunities and potential for professional growth.

However, despite the evident advantages associated with bilingualism in the job market, concerns have been raised among bilingual professionals regarding their career progression. Subsequent research conducted by Robert Walters (JCN Newswire, 2013) revealed a troubling discovery: nearly half of all bilingual professionals in Japan expressed dissatisfaction with the progression opportunities offered by their current companies. This finding raises critical questions about the extent to which bilingual skills are recognized and utilized within workplaces and the potential for individuals to fully leverage their language abilities to advance their careers. Addressing these concerns is vital to ensuring that bilingual professionals can thrive and contribute effectively in the job market, as well as to unlocking the full potential of bilingualism in the professional sphere.

Methodology

This section provides an overview of the research design and methodology utilized in the study to explore the acceptance of bilingualism in Japan and its implications in the job market. Employing a qualitative approach, the research aims to delve into the experiences and perspectives of bilingual individuals within Japanese society. By adopting a qualitative design, the study can more fully examine the cultural and societal factors influencing the acceptance of bilingualism while shedding light on the benefits and challenges faced by bilingual professionals in Japan.

The research examines a diverse group of bilingual individuals, encompassing both *haafu* (individuals of mixed Japanese and non-Japanese heritage) and fully Japanese

participants. The sample comprises four bilingual individuals who possess proficiency in both English and Japanese languages. Interviewee A and Interviewee T are fully Japanese individuals, one female and one male, respectively. On the other hand, Interviewee S and Interviewee K are *haafu* participants, one female and one male, respectively. This diverse selection allows for an exploration of the acceptance of bilingualism in Japan from various linguistic and cultural perspectives. The selection of one male and one female participant from each group ensures a balanced representation and an understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by bilingual individuals in Japanese society, particularly in the context of their careers and interactions within the job market.

All four participants in this study possess full bilingual proficiency and have completed educational courses conducted entirely in English. Additionally, they have significant international exposure, having resided outside of Japan ranging from one to five years. The ways they acquired their English language skills varied among the participants. The *haafu* participants acquired their bilingualism through family interactions, while the fully Japanese participants primarily acquired their English skills through formal education at school. It is noteworthy that, except for Interviewee A, the other participants secured employment positions prior to their university graduation. Interviewee A is a *freeter*, a term used to describe non-regular employees who typically work in part-time roles, and works as a barista, hall staff, and personal assistant. Interviewee S was able to secure a job at an IT startup company before her official graduation date, allowing her to work while she was writing her graduation thesis during her last semester at school. She currently works at another IT startup company, having made the switch due to dissatisfaction with her previous company. Interviewees T and K have remained with their initial employers since graduation at a chemical and IT company respectively.

These interviewees were selected based on their shared graduation year of April 2023, providing a contemporary perspective on the topic. The interviews were conducted about six months after they have joined the workforce. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes online using Zoom. To gather in-depth and nuanced information, semi-structured interviews (See Buis et al, 2016) were conducted with the selected participants. These interviews were carefully designed to be open-ended, enabling participants to freely express their thoughts, attitudes, and experiences concerning bilingualism and its acceptance in Japan. The interview questions were crafted to explore participants' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities related to bilingualism, their language-learning journeys, and how their bilingual skills have influenced their careers and interactions in the job market. The interviews underwent a transcription process following the clean verbatim transcription method, which involved minor editing to enhance readability. This method ensures that the transcript remains a faithful representation of the recorded content while eliminating extraneous elements that might distract from the core information (Oliver et al, 2005).

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to systematically scrutinize the interview data. The transcripts underwent revision by the author to identify recurring themes and patterns concerning the acceptance of bilingualism in Japanese society. By categorizing the data into meaningful themes, the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural, societal, and linguistic factors that impact individuals' bilingual experiences. This analytical process unveils some of the intricacies surrounding bilingualism in Japan, shedding light on some of the underlying reasons for limited acceptance and exploring potential avenues to promote a more inclusive language landscape. In considering how analysis can explore potential avenues, the author was thinking to delve into the root problems identified through the interviews, recognizing

specific areas that require attention and improvement, and subsequently offer solutions and recommendations based on the insights gained from this recognition.

Results

Cultural Challenges

One of the common cultural challenges faced by the interviewees is a feeling of being outcasts in the society. They experience a sense of alienation and social distance due to their language abilities. Despite being proficient in another language, they express feelings of exclusion and being different from others, which make forming connections or friendships difficult. This sense of isolation is rooted in their perception that bilinguals belong to a distinct category, setting them apart from the majority who may not share the same language proficiency:

Interviewee A: *“It's like the fact that I lived abroad and being bilingual puts me in a special category. So, like, when I was in university, the fact that I could speak English to other people is like, there is a clear line in between us and them. Like, sometimes it was really hard to be friends with them because it's just like, 'Oh, but you can speak English.' You know, you're different.”*

Interviewee S: *“In Japan? I think being bilingual kind of makes me like an outsider... Because Japanese is kind of my second language. I feel like I can never be on the inside of Japanese culture.”*

Interviewee T: *“I don't know... Like, I guess... It feels like they're sometimes out of place. Like you're- like you're an imposter, somehow.”*

Another cultural challenge faced by the interviewees is dealing with stereotypes and perceptions. Interviewees shared that there are preconceived notions and biases in the tendency to associate fluency to in a language with being a “native” speaker. Especially for bilingual individuals who are highly attuned to and integrated into Japanese society, this concept significantly impacts their approach to speaking English. It leads to a strong emphasis on achieving a “native-like” pronunciation as the only benchmark for considering themselves and others truly fluent in the language. These stereotypes create a complex landscape for bilinguals in Japan, where their language abilities are closely scrutinized and judged based on societal expectations. This is especially clear in comments by Interviewee S:

Interviewee S: *“I feel like, there are aspects of Japanese culture and even language where it's kind of like, 'Oh, you can only, like, fully speak the language unless you're Japanese.' Which I find myself even thinking that, sometimes... Like, for example, I can talk to someone who has the N1 certification of the JLPT [Japanese Language Proficiency Test]. Yet, I don't see them as fluent ... I know it's like really bad, but I do have that perception. Whereas in English, you could have a Malaysian accent, or Indonesian accent, or Southeast Asian accent, but people accept that you speak English ... So, I think because people have that perception of Japanese there, they kind of project that on English. I think that's why Japanese people are so fixated on, like, having a native pronunciation of English. It's because that's how they view Japanese.”*

Interviewee A: *“I think also bilingual is like something that is viewed as really special... And like, for example, you know, the stereotype I think is like, if you are bilingual, you look like... You have to dress like this and stuff.”*

Such stereotypes have contributed to a sense of pressure and hinder the acceptance and integration of bilingual individuals into Japanese society.

The interviewees also highlighted a significant cultural challenge related to the limited and stereotypical job opportunities faced by bilingual individuals in Japan, ironically enough, due to their language skills. They expressed frustrations about being confined to translation tasks, which suggests that companies often fail to recognize the diverse skill sets that bilingual employees possess beyond their language abilities. This one-dimensional view of bilinguals as language translators can hinder their professional growth and restrict their potential to contribute in more varied and valuable ways. Additionally, interviewees pointed out that bilinguals are frequently associated with English-related tasks, reinforcing the perception that their language proficiency is only applicable in specific contexts. They expressed a desire for their skills to be utilized in more meaningful and diverse roles beyond translation, debunking the common misconception that bilinguals are solely meant for language-related tasks:

Interviewee S: *“Uhm, professionally? I think at first I really didn't like being bilingual because ... for example, the company I was up before, when they get someone who's bilingual, they automatically just put them to do, for example, translation tasks. Like their own image of like bilingual people is, 'Oh, they can speak two languages!' And so, at my previous job, I really felt like I wasn't... given work that really benefitted me. Kind of, like, leveraging my skills beyond being able to just speak and relate to languages.”*

Interviewee T: *“But I mean, ... being bilingual is, you know, whatever is related to English, I'm your guy. That kind of, I guess, atmosphere.”*

Interviewee K: *“Asking someone to write you an email because you can't read English? It's like, what are you doing? I don't know. I feel like, that kind of thing would probably really annoy me if it happened, and I feel like this is not a good use of the resources of the people. And I feel like, bilingual people are, you know... If you're trying to translate, get a translator. Like, bilingual people, I feel, are more useful than just translating emails and stuff.”*

The interviewees shed light on another significant cultural challenge in Japan, which revolves around a profound sense of Japanese nationalism—essentially the connection between language, cultural heritage, and a strong sense of belonging. Interviewee S gave the example of the prevalent “us” versus “them” mentality, where language is perceived to be exclusive to specific groups. They emphasized that being bilingual or having multicultural backgrounds is not widespread in Japan, leading to potential difficulties for individuals who don't conform to the “*jun-japa*”¹ (Terasawa, 2015) norm in gaining full acceptance within society. This strong association between language, culture, and national identity creates a barrier that can make bilingual individuals feel like outsiders in their own country. This highlights a profound sense of Japanese nationalism, where language use, adherence to cultural norms, and national identity are intricately intertwined.

Interviewee S: *“I think this huge ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality or idea that language belongs to a*

¹ The term *Jun-Japanese*, or *Junjapa*, can be loosely translated as “pure Japanese.” This term is employed by Japanese individuals who lack international study experiences. They use it as a means of distinguishing themselves from those who have studied abroad or are returnees (Terasawa, 2015). It is pertinent to highlight that despite its lack of association with lineage or heritage, the prevalence of discourse associated with this term engenders concerns in Japanese society regarding unsophisticated engagement with racial topics.

group of people is what keeps Japanese people from being successful in learning English in the first place. I think there's a sense of perfectionism that comes to learning English in Japan. So, I think that's a huge hurdle [sic] that needs to be overcome, like. I don't know if it can be... But I think that's what makes bilinguals kind of like aliens in Japan, it's because of that perception. And I think, if that wasn't there, then it would just be like, it wouldn't even be a big deal to speak multiple languages."

Interviewee A: *"I think being bilingual or in general, like living abroad, is really not common in Japan. So like, there is, I think, the line between, like... You know this word jun-japa? ... it's like people who doesn't have any, like, multi... Multi-ethnic backgrounds, or like, who never really lived abroad for a really long time, like kikokushijo and stuff ..."*

Policy-Related Challenges

A policy-related challenge mentioned by the interviewee was the dominance of the Japanese language in Japan, which can create a noticeable divide between individuals who only speak Japanese and those who possess proficiency in other languages. Interviewees spoke of the Japanese language as being the primary means of communication in various settings, including workplaces. As a result, bilingual individuals may find themselves separated from their monolingual counterparts, leading to potential communication barriers and social divisions. This situation is viewed from the perspective of bilingual individuals who, despite their fluency in Japanese and ability to integrate into Japanese workplaces, can experience marginalization. This marginalization is often linked to their proficiency in two languages, particularly English, which paradoxically affects their ability to connect with their monolingual Japanese counterparts in the workplace.

Interviewee A: *"I can see that could happen in companies too. So, like those people who cannot speak any other languages besides Japanese, and then those people can speak different languages, it's like there's a line in between them."*

Another policy-related challenge highlighted by an interviewee was how language policies in Japan may not effectively recognize or incentivize bilingualism in the job market. Interviewee A shared her experiences of encountering some companies expressing a preference for Japanese candidates with language skills, but she also noticed a lack of clear and consistent policies regarding the valuation and rewards for bilingual abilities. Despite the requirement for candidates with language skills being specified in job listings, she expressed concerns that bilingual individuals' language proficiency is not adequately appreciated or rewarded with higher wages or additional benefits. This disparity in recognition for bilingualism in the job market can be disheartening for individuals who have developed and honed their language abilities, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive and supportive language policies that properly value and acknowledge the contributions of bilingual employees:

Interviewee A: *"So for example, arubaito and stuff ... sometimes they're like, 'Oh, we want people who can speak English, Chinese,' but you still can get the job without those skills. And then there is no plus like, for example, if you can speak English and they're going to increase the wage, and it's not like that at all ... I sometimes wonder like, you know, they're not really valuing [bilingual people] correctly."*

Another policy-related challenge highlighted by an interviewee was the lack of clarity

surrounding the concept of bilingualism in Japan. She pointed out that bilingualism was often narrowly defined based on unrealistic standards, such as having a "perfect" accent or effortlessly comprehending complex academic materials. This lack of clarity in her company represents a significant policy-related challenge because it reflects the absence of clear and inclusive language policies that can guide individuals and institutions in recognizing and embracing bilingualism. When there is no standardized or comprehensive definition of bilingualism within official policy frameworks, it leaves individuals and organizations to interpret the concept subjectively. As a result, people may internalize unrealistic standards, as described by the interviewee, that hinder their self-identification as bilinguals, although they possess valuable language skills:

Interviewee S: *"I think a lot of people have the perception if they don't have the perfect accent, then they don't speak English. Like even at my company—so, in our company, our common language is English. Like, at morning meetings, and in our Slack, in our chats, we all use English, and that's just the rule in the company. Other small meetings, we use Japanese, but there's a big effort to English. And, what I feel is, a lot of people who are perfectly fine communicating, like they can express their ideas ... by text either. But they don't see themselves as bilingual because they always say something like, ... 'I'm not bilingual' or 'because I have, like, an accent,' 'I'm not bilingual because I struggle to read like academic papers,' and I think, the standard is so high."*

Education as a Solution

During the interviews, the participants were asked about their perspectives on how to promote greater acceptance of bilingualism in Japan. A prevalent and recurring suggestion among the interviewees was to prioritize education as a key solution. They believe that by focusing on educational efforts, societal attitudes towards bilingualism can be positively influenced, leading to a more inclusive and accepting environment for individuals with multilingual abilities.

One of the key aspects emphasized by the interviewees was the need for more effective and motivational methods of educating people about language learning in schools. Interviewee A highlighted the importance of teachers providing clear guidance on the practical benefits and opportunities that come with language proficiency. In her own experiences as a student, without proper encouragement and direction, she could not fully comprehend the advantages of being bilingual, leading to a lack of motivation in language learning. Additionally, Interviewee K emphasized that language learning should not be limited to childhood but should be extended throughout adulthood. Both interviewees underscored the significance of lifelong learning and continuous efforts to acquire language skills even after formal education, emphasizing the importance of practical benefits, encouragement, and proper guidance in fostering a more accepting norm of bilingualism:

Interviewee A: *"Maybe if I were a teacher, then I will just ... try to tell them ... it's good to have a good motivation for trying to learn another language. And this is, you know, the benefits, bla bla bla. But I don't think I was told, like, 'If you can speak English, you can do this.' I don't think I heard our teacher saying that ... like, because teacher doesn't really give the correct advice, you don't know how acquiring another language can open your door, but it's just going to look like, you know, this kid is trying hard."*

Interviewee K: *"People should just learn English. I mean, it's hard, but I know a couple of people that learn English later after becoming an adult. And like, now, they're reasonably fluent in*

English. They're not great, but they've learned enough English to work in business."

Another key suggestion from the interviews was the importance of embracing a multicultural community. This underscores the significance of integrating multiculturalism into the educational curriculum and environment, where students can not only learn about various cultures and languages but also actively engage with them. By fostering a multicultural community within educational institutions, students are provided with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thereby promoting a more inclusive and enriched learning experience.

Creating an education about different cultures and languages enhances language skills and a sense of belonging. This connection between education and inclusivity is evident in Interviewee K's experience, where they feel more comfortable and accepted in a company that values diversity and cultivates a bilingual environment. Such acceptance allows individuals to be true to themselves without the pressure to conform to a specific cultural norm, demonstrating the positive impact of multicultural workplaces on language acceptance. Moreover, Interviewee T emphasizes the significance of increasing exposure to different languages in society, suggesting that a diverse and inclusive environment can cultivate a more accepting and open-minded attitude towards language diversity. This emphasizes how fostering a multicultural environment aligns with language education reforms, as it promotes inclusivity and encourages individuals to embrace their diverse linguistic skills and backgrounds.

Interviewee K: *"I still feel, like, I'm not really, like, super Japanese. It may be different if I was in, like, a different company. Like, I got lucky, I guess. Like, the company I am in allows me to just continue being who I was in university ... So, I don't have to, like, change myself and, like, try. Everyone's just kind of weird and bilingual and there's a strange bunch of people. Like, I don't actually try and be normal and proper and, you know, I can just hang out and be myself."*

Interviewee T: *"I mean in general, it's getting more and creating more exposure to different kinds of languages."*

Signage as an Educative Process

During the interviews, another solution that emerged was the idea of increasing exposure to different languages, particularly English, through signage and language displays in public spaces. Interviewee T highlighted the potential impact of encountering signs in English or other languages, as it could arouse curiosity and interest among individuals. The suggestion was to create a linguistic environment that reflects diversity, with the hope that people would become more open to learning other languages and recognize the value of bilingualism. Such exposure outside formal educational settings could contribute to normalizing multilingualism and cultivating a more accepting attitude towards language diversity in society.

Interviewee T: *"I guess just seeing signage everywhere. Yeah. I mean, for me, it's usually all about the signage. Somehow, if you see more signs in English, or other form of other languages, I think people come to appreciate it more. You know, they'd probably be like, 'Oh, What language is that?' and they might freak out at first. I think at some point they might probably understand that there is, you know, there are more languages and they might, at the end of the day, be interested in learning one of them. Or some of them, perhaps."*

Discussion

Cultural Challenges

The interview data revealed several cultural challenges that hinder the acceptance of bilingualism in Japan. One of the significant challenges was the perception of bilinguals as outcasts, a sentiment shared by Interviewees A, S, and T. They recounted their experiences of feeling isolated or different from others because of their language abilities. This sense of alienation can be linked to the prevailing concept of *nihonjinron* (Sugimoto, 2003), a belief in Japanese society that emphasizes the uniqueness and homogeneity of the Japanese identity. Bilingual individuals, who possess language skills beyond the perceived norm, might be viewed as deviating from this ideal, leading to their marginalization and creating social distance between them and others. The cultural expectation to conform to a particular linguistic and cultural identity can pose challenges for those who embody linguistic diversity, affecting their sense of belonging in Japanese society (Yamamoto, 2015).

Stereotypes and perceptions emerged as another critical cultural challenge. Interviewee A highlighted that bilingualism is often perceived as something special, but this perception also came with expectations related to appearance and behavior, influenced by the prevailing *nihonjinron* notion (Sugimoto, 2003). The notion that bilingual individuals were expected to adhere to specific cultural norms likely played a role in subjecting them to scrutiny and judgment based on societal expectations (Yamamoto, 2015). Additionally, Interviewee S expressed her view that for many people being considered truly fluent in Japanese required native-like proficiency, which could be attributed to the prevalent notion of language homogeneity in Japan, where Japanese is perceived as a single language representing a unified identity (Heinrich, 2012). She further explained that this idea was projected onto English, leading to an emphasis on achieving a native-like pronunciation to be considered truly fluent in English. The interviewee's perspective aligns with Bloomfield's (1985) earlier idea that being bilingual entails being native-like in both languages. However, it is essential to understand that these beliefs are rooted in the language homogeneity discourse (Heinrich, 2012) and the *nihonjinron* discourse (Sugimoto, 2003). The perpetuation of these stereotypes and expectations surrounding language proficiency can create a challenging environment for bilingual individuals, impacting their self-perception and societal acceptance.

The interview data also shed light on how bilinguals faced stereotypes regarding job availability. Interviewees S, T, and K expressed frustration with being pigeonholed into translation tasks, emphasizing that their diverse skill sets beyond language were often overlooked by employers. These sentiments are further supported by the findings of the Robert Walters Employee Insights Survey (JCN Newswire, 2013), which revealed that half of all bilingual professionals in Japan were dissatisfied with the progression opportunities offered by their current companies. The survey indicated that over half of the respondents felt their current progression opportunities were either weak (30.5%) or very weak (26.2%). In contrast, less than one in ten bilingual workers rated their advancement chances as strong (7.6%) or very strong (2.1%). One third of professionals (33.7%) felt their opportunities were adequate. The lack of significant advancement prospects is understandable, considering that bilinguals are often perceived solely as translators in the office, with their abilities not being fully utilized. This narrow view of bilinguals' potential roles may have contributed to their dissatisfaction with job progression, hindering their professional growth and restricting their contributions beyond language-related tasks.

Lastly, the interviews provided insights into how notions of national identity influence the acceptance of bilingualism in Japan. Interviewee S highlighted the prevalent "us" versus "them" mentality in Japan, which created barriers for successful English

language learning and fostered a sense of perfectionism. This phenomenon can be understood in the context of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which stipulates that individuals tend to categorize themselves and others into specific groups based on perceived similarities or differences. Additionally, Interviewee A pointed out the lack of common multicultural experiences in Japan, resulting in a division between individuals who had lived abroad and those who hadn't. These notions of national identity, influenced by the *nihonjinron* idea (Yamamoto, 2015), hinders the integration of bilingual individuals into Japanese society. The strong association between language, cultural background, and national identity contributes to a sense of alienation, making bilingual individuals feel like outsiders in their own society (Sugimoto, 2003).

Policy-Related Challenges

Policy-related challenges emerged from the interview data, shedding light on how language dynamics and policies affect the acceptance of bilingualism in Japan. One significant policy challenge is the dominance of the Japanese language, as highlighted by Interviewee A. The prevailing societal situation in language homogeneity contributes to the perception that Japanese is a single, unified language that represents the nation's identity (Heinrich, 2012). This perspective may downplay the importance of other languages and bilingualism itself, and create a preference for monolingualism in certain contexts. Such dominance by the Japanese language can potentially marginalize bilingual individuals, reinforcing the idea that Japanese is the primary language and overshadowing the value of multilingualism in society (Kubota & McKay, 2009). Addressing this policy challenge requires promoting a more inclusive language environment that recognizes the importance of diverse languages and encourages the acceptance and appreciation of bilingual individuals. Such policies should actively recognize the importance of diverse languages and encourage the acceptance and appreciation of bilingual individuals. These language policies, which extend to curriculum development, workplace communication, and public discourse, can play a pivotal role in shaping a society that values linguistic diversity and supports the full integration of bilingualism (See Pearce & Oyama, 2019). By fostering an environment where bilingualism is celebrated and accommodated, policymakers can contribute significantly to promoting inclusivity and advancing language education reforms.

Furthermore, Interviewee A indicated that language policies play a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards bilingualism in Japan, emphasizing that the lack of clear and consistent policies regarding the recognition and reward for bilingual abilities can hinder the promotion and acceptance of bilingualism in the job market. It is essential to recognize that bilingualism can encompass various language pairs beyond just English and Japanese, such as Japanese and Korean, Japanese and Spanish, or Japanese and other languages. Japan's diverse population includes minorities like *Zainichi* Koreans, *Kikokushijo*, and the Ainu, who may have multilingual abilities (Lu et al., 2005). However, despite their language proficiency, they might face discrimination based on their ethnic background, which is particularly evident among *Kikokushijo* who share the same racial background as the majority community in Japan (see Hiwasaki, 2000; Kim, 2015; Yamamoto, 2015). This closed-mindedness towards bilingualism might also stem from Japanese people's preference for English over other languages, which could be detrimental as it hinders the acceptance of multi-literacy (Kubota & McKay, 2009). Addressing these issues requires promoting a more inclusive approach to bilingualism that values and recognizes the diverse linguistic abilities of individuals and creates an environment where multilingualism is appreciated and embraced.

Additionally, the interview data highlighted a challenge related to policies and social

expectations, including a lack of clarity in the definition of bilingualism. Interviewee S pointed out the common perception of equating bilingualism with native-like proficiency (Bloomfield, 1985), which can create unrealistic expectations for language learners (Block, 2010). These high standards may lead individuals to doubt their language abilities and limit their self-identification as bilinguals, even if they are proficient in multiple languages (Kirkpatrick, 2012). To foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for bilingualism, it is crucial to adopt a definition of bilingualism that recognizes and appreciates various levels of language proficiency, encouraging individuals to embrace their multilingual skills without feeling inadequate or excluded. By advocating for a more flexible and encompassing approach to bilingualism, and by encouraging society to shape policies that better support and value the diverse linguistic abilities of individuals, we can ultimately promote a more inclusive and accepting environment for multilingualism in Japan.

Education as a Solution

The significance of education in promoting bilingualism and creating an inclusive environment for language diversity was a recurring theme in the interviews. Interviewee A emphasized the need to increase exposure to English within the school context. By employing a more open-minded approach, using critical literacy skills (see McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004), educators could help students appreciate the importance of bilingualism and comprehend the advantages of learning multiple languages. By engaging in critical discussions about language, students can develop a more nuanced view of bilingualism as a valuable asset rather than a mere skill. In this way, critical literacy skills promote a broader and more inclusive perspective on bilingualism, helping students recognize its significance in a globalized world and encouraging them to embrace language diversity. To achieve this, incorporating diverse linguistic resources and cultural materials into the curriculum would expose students to a broader range of languages and cultures, fostering a greater acceptance of language diversity (Heineke & McTighe, 2018). The interviews highlighted the potential of education as a means to reshape attitudes and perceptions towards bilingualism, ultimately contributing to a more accepting and inclusive society.

Expanding exposure to other languages outside of formal educational settings was highlighted as another crucial aspect influencing the acceptance of bilingualism, as mentioned by Interviewee T. Specifically, Interviewee T gave the example of signage, which can be understood in the context of a "linguistic landscape" (Rowland, 2013)—where signs in multiple languages reflect a diverse linguistic environment. This notion aligns with the concept of *translingualism*, a pedagogical approach that recognizes and values multiple languages and has been supported by evidence of its positive impact on students (García & Wei, 2014). Encouraging the use of multiple languages in various social contexts, such as increasing signboards in different languages, can contribute to the creation of a more linguistically diverse environment that normalizes multilingualism (Turnbull, 2019). This exposure outside the classroom can also facilitate incidental learning of vocabulary (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

Embracing a multicultural community is the last essential aspect of promoting bilingualism. Interviewee K highlighted the significance of accepting and celebrating diversity within the community. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) emphasizes how individuals categorize themselves and others into specific groups based on perceived similarities or differences. Instead of fostering and encouraging an "us" versus "them" ideology, by promoting a sense of belonging and acceptance within a multicultural community, individuals are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their unique backgrounds and linguistic abilities (Lu et al., 2005). This, in turn, contributes to a more

inclusive and supportive society for bilingual individuals, where their language skills are valued and appreciated.

Conclusion

The interviews provide valuable insights into the challenges hindering the acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market, which can be divided into cultural and policy-related issues. The cultural challenges include bilingual individuals: being treated as outcasts; facing stereotypes and unhelpful perceptions, and limited job opportunities; and grappling with notions of national identity. On the other hand, the policy-related challenges involved the dominance of the Japanese language, unclear language policies, and a lack of clarity in the definition of bilingualism.

In light of the research question on the limited acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market, the findings confirm that it was rooted in cultural and policy-related challenges. To address these challenges and promote bilingualism as a valuable asset, comprehensive language education reforms, cultural exchange programs, and inclusive language policies were proposed. By incorporating these strategies, bilingualism can be better encouraged and accepted as a crucial skill for businesses and professionals in Japan. For policymakers, businesses, and educators, several recommendations can be considered. Increasing exposure to multi-literacy in classrooms can be achieved by incorporating diverse linguistic resources and cultural materials into the curriculum, providing students with a broader range of languages and cultures to explore. Furthermore, reforms in language policies can foster a more inclusive environment, recognizing and appreciating various levels of language proficiency. Educational reforms can also play a vital role in promoting bilingualism, encouraging students to embrace their multilingual skills without feeling inadequate or excluded.

Despite the valuable insights gained from the interviews, the study has certain limitations. The sample size of interviewees cannot fully represent the diverse experiences and perspectives of bilingual individuals in Japan. Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by bilinguals in the job market. Moreover, exploring the long-term effects of implementing language education reforms and language policies on the acceptance of bilingualism and job market dynamics could be an avenue for future research.

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the cultural and policy-related challenges hindering the acceptance of bilingualism in the Japanese job market. By recognizing these challenges and implementing effective strategies, Japan can foster an environment that embraces bilingualism as a valuable asset, contributing to the growth and development of its economy and society. Policymakers, businesses, and educators play a crucial role in promoting inclusive language policies, comprehensive language education, and cultural exchange programs, paving the way for a more open-minded and competitive job market in Japan. This competitiveness pertains to both the ability to attract and retain talent on a global scale and the increased competitiveness of individuals within the job market, as they become better equipped with diverse linguistic and cultural skills.

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