

The relationship between language and cultural education and education for democratic citizenship

So far we have explained the purpose for which we created this book, the type of learning it aims for, how to use the book to achieve that, and what is required of you and what to be careful of when learning from this book. Perhaps at this point, you feel that the book is quite different from other books on Japanese-language education or previous courses you encountered, and you are wondering why we chose to include dialog as part of Japanese-language education. Accordingly, we will now explain our thinking behind the creation of this book.

First, recall what we wrote under Philosophy of This Book. The principle that this book holds dear is democratic citizenship. We, the authors, believe that there is a need for education that cultivates democratic citizenship. And furthermore, we believe that education for intercultural understanding and language education, such as Japanese-language education, is very helpful for cultivating democratic citizenship.

The identities and values among the people who together create the society we live in are diverse. The languages that people can use vary from person to person as well. For each individual, they may understand some languages well, and others only a little, or they may be able to converse but not read in that language, or the other way around, so an individual's language skills are also uneven. However, that does not mean that there is any absolute difference in value between those languages. Just because you are fluent in a language does not mean that it has more value than a language in which you can only speak a few words. Neither should it be true that the languages spoken by the majority have more value to society than those spoken by the few.

The miniature societies of classrooms are filled with many different types of people and are full of diversity. If there are 10 people in the class, then each has a different language ability. But that does not mean the person with the best language ability is the most important. It is no different than saying that someone is better as a person because they got a higher score on a test. Recall what you read under Six Points to Connecting the Philosophy with Use. We wrote that as Japanese speakers, the students and teacher are on an equal footing. Do you think that the Japanese teacher is more important than the students learning Japanese? At the very least, you cannot say that they are better because they speak Japanese. If you were to say that, it would mean that a student with roots in a foreign country who can freely express themselves in a language that the teacher doesn't know, such as their native language, is more important than the teacher. In other words, as members of society, the teacher and students have equal value. They are on an equal footing in a society that uses any given language. The same can be said not only for language but for culture.

And that relationship by which we are all loosely connected forms the society that we live in.

In other words, the classroom is one type of society. And the person learning in that place is a member of that society, or in other words, a citizen of it. Diverse people gather in this miniature society to become loosely connected to each other by learning together, by which they spend the short time of just an hour or so living together in that class. This is the nature of a class in language education. The rich diversity within the class is very similar to the society outside the class. For that reason, there is great potential for language education for learning the stance and methods (what we call democratic citizenship) to learn tolerance for others and live together with others in society. That is why this book is attempting to make the “place” for language education, such as Japanese-language education, a place for education for democratic citizenship.

Everything we have explained up to this point is intended to help you acquire and develop democratic citizenship. But when you actually study using this book, you need not think about democratic citizenship. Rather, we want you to think about maintaining a critical stance to look into yourself and others, acknowledge others with tolerance, make new discoveries, and get along with others through the “place” of dialog. Please enjoy yourself as you build on the “place” of dialog and cross-cultural understanding. If you do so, you will naturally acquire and cultivate your own democratic citizenship.

Now, turn to the next page. It’s time to get started! A diverse and free world for learning about democratic citizenship is awaiting you! Through dialog, enjoy yourself as you learn about the way other people think, interact with people with a variety of different values, and widen your own world.

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