

LD SIG Members' voices

LD SIG メンバーの声

Overcoming Anxiety: Knowing Myself and Filling the Gaps

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Although there are many individuals with mixed roots (bi/multi-racial, ethnic, cultural people) in Japan, there are still many misconceptions about their persona and abilities. One of the most common being about language ability. Many people seem to believe that “ハーフ / Hafu”, individuals who are considered half Japanese and half non-Japanese, are naturally bilingual or multilingual. The term “Hafu” may be controversial, but I am going to use this word in this article since the context is based on Japanese society and it is commonly used in Japan. I did not like the term “Hafu” when I was a child but I have come to be gradually tolerant of the phrase. I personally think the term “Hafu” does not always carry a negative meaning, but the context in which the term “Hafu” is used often leads to negative meanings. Some people claim that we should use “Double” instead of “Hafu”, but to me, the term “Double” seems to force mixed roots individuals to acquire two languages and

customs. Therefore I do not use “Double” but use “Hafu” according to context.

I was born and grew up in Japan as half Japanese and half Algerian. Since my parents' common language was English, they use Japanese and English, or a mixture of these languages at home. I went through kindergarten to university, all in the Japanese educational system. Therefore, I am a native speaker of Japanese. My mother taught me English at home so I could understand when my parents were talking. However, I seldom spoke English. Even if my father said something to me in English – I responded in Japanese without any reason. Moreover, I did not have any chance to learn French and Arabic, both of which are native to Algeria, except being able to count one to ten and sing two songs in French.

When I was a child I was often asked whether I could speak English although English is not spoken in Algeria. I always answered, “No, I can't” (In Japanese). Because I knew that if I said “Yes”, then people would think I was a perfect bilingual, so I said “No”. Then people would say, “What a waste!” or “Why don't you work harder as you are living in such an ideal environment to learn English?” Thanks to my parents, I was good at English in school,

but I knew that what other people expected from me was not just getting good grades at school, but speaking English fluently. At first I was not pessimistic at all, but after I graduated from high school, I gradually realised the huge gap between what other people expected of me and my true abilities. I also realised the gap between my listening and speaking abilities. I could talk about easy things with simple vocabulary, but once the topic became a bit complicated I could not say any words and that was very frustrating.

When I was a teenager I wanted to study both English and music at university. In the end I decided to study music. However, during my time at music university, I felt that I was still missing something in my life and realised that it was proficiency in English. I realised that without becoming proficient in English, I would somehow never be truly confident of myself. Therefore, I decided to study English to overcome something that I was missing. I was also interested in education, so I decided to go to another university and major in English education, after I graduated from the music university. I wanted to improve my speaking abilities but at the same time I was wondering why it was so hard to speak English fluently even though I could understand what others were saying, and what made me feel anxious about speaking. I understood that many language learners seemed to experience anxiety when they speak a new language, but I also thought that my

feelings might not be exactly the same as that of other Japanese students. All these feeling and experiences became not only my motivation to speak English, but also my research question.

Whilst studying English education, I joined a group that consisted of mixed roots individuals. I met one woman who was half Japanese and half Argentinean. She had also been through the Japanese education system and initially she could not speak Spanish, but after she became an adult, she went to Argentina and became fluent in Spanish after staying there for one year. One day we were talking about language acquisition of mixed roots people and our experiences. She told me that the sooner you overcome your anxiety, the sooner you improve your speaking abilities. I realised that I had been concerned too much about the gap between the image of being “Hafu” in Japan and myself. Anxiety had made me avoid having a chance to speak or even taking risks to improve my speaking skills.

During my second undergraduate experience, I had a chance to go to the US as an exchange student and studied TESOL there. Throughout the year, I was still not comfortable speaking, but I was really interested in the topics in the TESOL course, such as the mechanisms of language acquisition, and teaching methodologies. I wanted to share my opinions in class, so I began to speak out before

worrying about my speaking abilities. Sometimes it was hard to make people understand what I wanted to say because of my lack of ability, but the feeling that I really wanted to share my opinions to others was such a strong feeling that it motivated me to speak more and foster my autonomy to study more vocabulary and grammar by myself.

Many mixed roots individuals, especially those who are not fully bilingual seem to encounter and suffer anxiety over their language abilities. They may feel like they are lacking something that they were suppose to have, even though it is not true and language acquisition is influenced by their living environment and not by blood. However, their roots can be a great reason to learn languages and motivate them. After finishing TESOL course in the US and graduating the second university in Japan, I attended the University of Nottingham, UK, to take a master's degree in applied linguistics and ELT, and now I am teaching English to university students in Japan. Comparing my past and present, I feel that I am becoming sufficiently "Hafu", and I am able to celebrate both my first language and roots. Language is inextricably linked to my identity as a person of mixed roots. Acknowledging its importance has been a key factor in fostering my own self-esteem. This is especially important for learners in Japan because the social expectation may pressure mixed roots individuals to be forced to learn, or anxiety might dissuade them from learning and result

in limiting their abilities and choice. This must certainly have an impact on an individual's identity development, as I have found to be the case.

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