
Opinion and Perspective

Neurodiversity in a Quasi-Bilingual University in Japan

Yasushi Miyazaki

Kwansei Gakuin University

This paper is a self-reflection analysis of a neurodivergent scholar who studied in a quasi-bilingual master's program at a Japanese graduate school. An autoethnographic approach can mine *the scholar's life experiences* for insights about pursuing social change. After finishing a bachelor's degree in English at a Japanese college, the author entered another university in Japan to pursue a master's degree in policy studies under an English-speaking professor of linguistics and language policy. The author had a lot of anxiety upon his entrance to the master's program; however, positive feedback and encouragement by classmates helped his immersion in the new academic environment. Despite a lack of organized institutional accommodation, the author's classmates' informal moral support helped the author's professional growth. Recalling an analysis of blackness, giftedness, and dyslexia, for analyzing social/cultural norms and neurodiversity, this paper suggests that accommodations sometimes do not work well for neurodivergent students. Moreover, language teachers should not limit their attention to foreign language proficiency, because the author's experience suggests that a language teacher who has a holistic understanding of neurodivergent students can better support their general communicative growth.

Self-disclosure and Scope

I was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) in 1997, when I was a high school student suffering from a wide range of developmental issues. For instance, I had sensory issues, such as being too sensitive to sound, and time management difficulties, including a tendency to do important tasks last. Additionally, I had been struggling with emotional issues. In fact, I used to be anxious and quick-tempered; I could not imagine what *emotional management* was like and thought it was a myth. Fortunately, quality education and moral

support have resulted in my status as a postdoctoral researcher with part-time academic jobs and a quasi-bilingual ability.

Despite eventual success, I suffered from my graduate program's lack of systematic support and structured knowledge about my developmental issues. Even though a lot of time has passed since my master's study, it remains difficult for me to think about my emotional distress at that time. However, I wish to tell my story, with the hope of informing teachers who may encounter neurodivergent students and encouraging other neurodivergent scholars who may be experiencing similar emotional trauma. Now may also be a good time to speak out on this issue, because a growing number of educators and researchers are thinking about inclusion in higher education campuses. Boeltzig-Brown (2017), discussing policy development and legislation for supporting persons with disabilities in Japan, and Kondo et al. (2015), discussing the institutional support systems, both note that the development of support for students with disabilities in higher education in Japan is very recent.

Neurodiversity in Japanese Colleges and Universities

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Version 5 (DSM-5)* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), neurodiversity includes atypical conditions that can arise in neurological development. A neurodivergent student/scholar is a learner with these developmental disorders: autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, specific learning disorders, and neurodevelopmental disorders not otherwise specified, as a Japanese law *Hattatsu Shogaisha Shienho [Persons with Developmental Disorders Support Act]* (Japan, 2004) defines for *hattatsu shogai* (developmental disorders).

Students with developmental disorders will become more visible in English language classrooms in Japanese postsecondary education, such as Aruga (2017), Lowe (2016), and Young (2019) have suggested. These teacher-scholars are also concerned about the lack of professional development and intersectional collaboration about developmental disorders for language teachers. For instance, Aruga (2017) gathered concrete tips for accommodating students with

developmental disorders by gathering experiences from 16 language teachers. Aside from that, as Lowe (2016) suggests, there is the need for professional development education of language teachers for accommodating students with disabilities. Furthermore, Young (2019) argues that language education teachers need to learn from special education professionals about providing both language education and special education accommodations to students with disabilities. Those practitioners suggest that English education as a professional field has room for improvement in regard to faculty development.

The Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the governmental entity that is responsible for statistics and professional training of postsecondary students with disabilities, notes that the number of students with developmental disorders is increasing. In the 2020 fiscal year, the number of students with developmental disorders was 7,654 out of the 35,341 total number of students with disabilities. This number is a marked increase from 589 in the 2019 academic year (JASSO, 2021: 10). Thus, both in the field of language teaching and with regard to disabilities in general, the accommodation of students with developmental disorders has become a critical issue.

While the above practitioners provided language teachers with their observations about accommodation and practical tips for teaching students with developmental disorders, there is some room to investigate regarding the students' actual needs and their academic/professional development. With this observation, this paper provides a learner's perspective of language learning and professional development in postsecondary education in Japan with the intent to encourage readers to pay closer attention to learners' voices. My hope is that language teachers may better understand the neurodivergent learner's perceptions in higher education, including English, and that their better understanding may help them craft better organizational accommodations.

Methodology

Though not a full multifaceted autoethnography, this essay has been inspired by autoethnography, the ethnography for self, especially as introduced by Carolyn Ellis and her colleagues (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011; Adams et

al., 2014) for revealing knowledge of the researchers themselves for social change. According to Poulos (2021),

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues. (p. 4)

Because neurodivergency is a social characteristic similar to class or race in its categorization of persons, an ethnographic perspective can be especially enlightening. Upon my analysis, the triple identity theory by Robinson (2015, 2017), who is a scholar with dyslexia, inspired me to use a theory to analyze my experience. As a tool for reflexivity, his basic suggestion and caveat for writers was that they write their pieces and revise them repeatedly. I employed intensive memory mining and writing, as well as repetition/revision. Third-person interview(s), textual analysis, and other data collection methods can be used, but this paper focuses on the self-reflection of my memories.

Neurodiversity and Autoethnography

Even before recent interest in autoethnography, several memoirs of academics with developmental disorders gained public attention worldwide (Grandin & Scariano, 1986; Willey, 1999; Shore, 2003). Since the emergence of autoethnography, many academics with disabilities like myself have published on how to survive in higher education, including Hughes (2012) on Asperger's syndrome and Skinner (2011) on identity as a "dyslexic" mother and university lecturer. Their insights bring our attention to the social barriers for neurodivergent scholars, as well as troubles caused by the interaction of their impairment and the environment. With regard to Japan, although this is not an autoethnography per se, Manabe (2014) published her experience about a formerly bullied child who became a professor at the University of Tokyo, one of the top-ranked universities in Japan. Having said that, as developmental disorders have not been the subject of autoethnography in the context of education in Japan, I hope this paper

will raise important viewpoints for teachers, and especially regarding language teaching and second language learning that my personal experience informs.

Autoethnography in Japan

To date, autoethnographic works in Japan strongly focus on cultural negotiations between the society and the individual, but they do suggest applications to English language teaching. In Japan, emerging autoethnography has revealed power in identity politics. Kawaguchi (2019) critically analyzed people's stereotypes against local Japanese people and offered self-reflection. Kawaguchi realized that a person's difference is not a collective cultural difference, but an individual difference. Immigrant teachers in Japanese higher education, Gaitanidis and Shao-Kobayashi (2020) discussed framing a Japanese Studies curriculum in the context of "internationalization" of a Japanese university and revealed the dynamics of negotiation of different cultures for constructing a new way of conceptualizing Japanese Studies. According to Davis (2011), disability and neurodiversity has been rarely considered a part of cultural diversity, especially in university communities, although this is starting to change in the U.S. For example, Jaeger (2018) urged library designers to consider disabilities when designing in the context of diversity and inclusion. Multiculturalism discourse could include a new idea in social work research that considers impairment in the body of persons with a disability and its interaction with the surrounding environment to be an "impairment culture" (Matsuoka, 2018). If this concept is feasible for thinking about cultural diversity, multicultural research on autoethnography would be fruitful for bridging materialistic points of view and discourse for the societies where neurodivergent persons live.

Starting My New School Life

I should have been excited to leave behind my undergraduate years, when I had experienced people's ignorance and misunderstanding about my disability, being harassed because of my diagnosis and atypical behavior, and suffering through many uncomfortable events. However, as I began life as a master's student (2005–2007), I was worried about how graduate school would be. My undergraduate

supervisor had talked a lot about how tough graduate school life was for him, and I worried that I would not be able to get along with my new classmates.

One hopeful note was that, because I had decided to go to a graduate school in a different university, I had already agreed via email to work together with my graduate supervisor. In email, he gave me many constructive comments on my research idea, so I was partly confident about writing up my own research.

Still, I had some anxiety about the coursework and relationship with classmates. I majored in English as an undergraduate, and the study was practical rather than theoretical. I took practical English courses 10 hours per week, so I was fairly confident in my English language skills; however, I was less confident about learning more theoretical social sciences in the Policy Studies program. My college did not fulfill my desire to study because I merely studied English and gained no additional expertise. It was a kind of a moratorium period, but I am sure I learned a lot about using languages, although it was not a language school per se.

My worry about interpersonal issues with classmates remained during the initial weeks of graduate school. I was too anxious to enter the graduate students' common study room. To work on my assignments and documents, I used the undergraduate students' computer room instead. It was a part of my coping strategy to do my assignments. However, I gradually got used to communicating with my new peers. Because graduate classes were smaller than undergraduate ones, I had to introduce myself in the first class meetings of all the courses that I took. I came to understand my classmates as well as they understood me. About half of my classmates came from the undergraduate program of my graduate school, but another half either were from other schools or were mature students with full-time jobs. Thus, my self-stigma as an outsider gradually disappeared.

The main reason for choosing my supervisor was that he was an English-speaking linguist from the U.S. I intended to improve my English language proficiency to the level that would enable me to actually use English professionally. I had hoped to study abroad, but I could not because of my health and finances during my undergraduate years. So, getting the opportunity to use English as a *lingua academica* in my social science study in Japan was the next

best thing. Although most classes were offered in Japanese, communicating with my supervisor and some other professors was in English, so I felt my dream to study social science subjects in English was coming true.

Struggle with Research

Still, I was wondering about my research topic. I had already submitted a research plan during my entrance exam, but I soon began to think of a more interesting topic. My original research interest was on the political and media discourse regarding people with developmental disorders. However, when I was writing the application to the graduate program, I began to feel that I was going beyond my ability, because I was suddenly confronted with online criticism about research on the autism spectrum. An internet post I saw argued that researchers should not carelessly touch on autism because they would damage autistic people. I felt like I was being attacked by that writer, because the post connoted that academic research on autism should be done by only a very limited number of extraordinary scholars. So, I decided not to study it. Instead, I wrote a research plan about foreigners in Japan and was admitted to the graduate school I was applying for.

Once enrolled, I encountered two graduate classmates with physical disabilities. As a teaching assistant, I also helped an undergraduate student with visual impairment. Meeting these students with disabilities challenged me to face my own identity. I began to ask myself, “Yasushi, why do you deny your own identity?” Then, I decided to disclose my identity as a person with PDD to my supervisor, and I sought his view on my intention to shift my research topic to something related to autism. My supervisor said, “That is wonderful. Please study what you are passionate about.” But suddenly, after this conversation, I began feeling extremely bad: “Can I really do this study?” I changed my mind again and started exploring a newer research topic for my master’s thesis. Years later, discussions with this professor revealed that, despite his encouragement regarding a topic related to autism, he was also willing to accept my change of topic, because he assumed that the new topic must be something that I was even more passionate about. My professor seemed to not realize that I needed extra encouragement to pursue the autism topic, so he did not offer that

accommodation, i.e., to deny my request for a topic change and to offer extra encouragement. In retrospect, I could have discussed my feelings more fully with my professor. Similarly, had he been more knowledgeable about my disability and personality quirks, he could have provided better guidance.

Also in the first year, I took an intercultural communication class taught in English. I was faced with two traumatic events. When I read a handout in English out loud for a presentation, one student complained, “I don't understand” in Japanese. In addition, I felt that the professor criticized my pronunciation and content more harshly than the other students. As a result, I lost confidence in my English-speaking skills. A week later, another classmate told me that “the professor showed his original criticism because he values your potential.” I wondered if it was true, but I felt a lack of confidence, too.

Fortunately, my part-time work outside of the university helped me to function better in the university. Right after my first year, I found an advertisement for a short-term internship program at a community radio station in Kobe that was serving many international residents there. I applied and was accepted, and I helped them with various activities, including assisting the program director with archiving. The radio station extended the term of my job until 2007; my supervisor at this radio station encouraged me to work with him and to apply the experience to my research.

I was also able to strengthen my English proficiency because I was inspired to use English online. I got accustomed to searching for literature in electronic databases and reading research papers written in English. Many classmates were surprised because some of them, especially outside of the school, said they were not confident using English.

Trying to Hide My Disability

I tried to hide my disability identity from the people around me on campus, and this worked somewhat organically. However, I made some missteps, which had bad consequences because I had not disclosed my disability to others.

1. I interrupted a professor in class meetings because he had said “students can comment anytime.” A few weeks later, other students scolded me to

not speak too much. Looking back on that episode, I assume I interpreted the professor's suggestion too literally. I did not read the person enough to be polite to the professor.

2. I made a mistake in scheduling two appointments too closely, and a person extended the prior one. So, I was late for the second appointment with a professor (not supervisor) of one of the courses I took in the second year. He got angry, saying, "You were bad about time management. You were not a true graduate student." I knew he assisted his students' study about developmental disorders, so I had assumed that he understood my characteristics, but he did not. Because I had not disclosed my identity to him, he might not have understood how to deal with me. I had failed to learn that I should explicitly explain my need. I had a kind of expectation that others would understand my need implicitly.

The university policy was to not disclose a student's medical conditions, including disabilities, unless the student requested otherwise. This can be viewed as an institutional failure because it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the university to provide accommodations for students who do not request disclosure. Nevertheless, the teacher-student dyad is more important than the institutional context, so I feel the student and teacher must try to work things out even when there is inadequate institutional support. In my case, it could be said that limitation of my non-disclosure was explicit, and my hope for understanding of my disability brought failure.

Struggling with Job Hunting

Another challenge was job hunting. Many classmates received job offers, but I could not until the very end of the second academic year. One student upset me by saying that I should work much harder than other students. He said he could criticize my ability because he studied psychology, and that enabled him to evaluate the workability of people. I thought it made no sense, because an academic discipline should not be used for judging a person's life so easily. The director of the office of career services said I did not have to search for a job, and that instead I should be hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital because I am

autistic. I assume that some professionals at the career services had a sort of stereotype that those persons with autism could not have regular jobs.

Another classmate said that I would become a person who was “not in employment, education, or training” (NEET), a term that was used in the media at the time to describe unemployable people in Japan. I was really embarrassed by these criticisms, and I cursed my identity and character as a student with PDD.

Achieving Some Success

My motivation to live was boosted when I finally received my first full-time job offer as a staff member of a nonprofit group serving people with developmental disorders. As a result, I was happy because I would not be treated as NEET. I was certainly influenced by the public discourse, which connoted that NEET persons were lazy or spoiled young persons without any passion or vision to their future. According to the analysis of Inui (2005) and Genda (2007), this status was not due to the young people’s mental problems but instead was due to a structural problem of education and industry in Japan.

In addition to getting a job, completing my master’s thesis was successful, as my supervisor was patient and flexible. By finishing writing a thesis in English, I had achieved my academic goal to successfully study social science in English in Japan. To make a long story short, the two years in my master’s program was a pivotal moment to boost my growth as a professional for a number of reasons, but let me list three of them here.

First, I got courage to disclose my neurodivergent identity. Even now, I hide my identity from certain people, but I have noticed that some people can understand me better when I tell them about my neurodivergence. Moreover, in the academic communities I am involved in, I disclose my identity more often. Unfortunately, sometimes it does not help, such as with the director of the office of career services.

Second, I encountered a good mentor, a graduate supervisor. He not only helped me improve my English, but he also taught me a lot about my communication in a general sense. He taught me to not be too humble, e.g., when asking for help orally, and he offered other advice which I follow. For

instance, the supervisor gave me advice to give concrete examples when I express some concerns to others. As he is originally from an English-speaking country (the United States), the supervisor's opinions focused on clarity and accuracy. I have maintained a mentor-mentee relationship with him for over fifteen years.

Third, I gradually got accustomed to using English, not as a subject of learning, but as a medium of communication. In graduate school, professors assigned students to read content materials, including policy analysis and intercultural communication, which are beyond English as a Foreign Language (EFL) materials. In such an environment, the supervisor encouraged me to use only English when I communicated with him, so I became immersed in a half-and-half Japanese-English study environment. About a half of my coursework was taught in English, and even Japanese professors assigned English reading, although it is historically typical in graduate programs in Japan in general.

Working as a Scholar

After a winding-road journey of employment and scholarship, I landed an academic job in April 2022. Through July 2022, I worked on evaluating my language teaching at a university in western Japan. Since then, I have taught English as a part-time teacher at multiple colleges. Also, in one of my projects, I worked with colleagues in Europe and South America via remote meetings and E-mail correspondences. English is the lingua franca in such meetings, so I am immersed in it while engaging in work. My boss has often praised my work, and he has even relied on me to explain our research to the public via TV interviews. Such feedback has increased my confidence.

Discussion

My experience can be interpreted within a framework of intersectionality in terms of intragroup differences. (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Originally developed from Crenshaw's discussion of how "black women" can suffer differently from either blacks or women, this idea has been applied to disability studies (e.g., Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Ben-Moshe & Magana, 2014).

Reflecting upon my situation, I feel the intersectionality involved my

identity as a neurodivergent and as an English language learner. Based on my high scores for written exams, some professors classified me as a capable student, and they formed high expectations of me for other academic tasks. However, seeing my performance in a face-to-face seminar context, other professors judged me as incapable, and they formed low expectations of me for other tasks, such as library research. Overall, my professors failed to look for the differences between high scorers who were neurodivergent and those who were not, or between low scorers who were or were not neurodivergent.

Because I was learning academic English in Japan, it is also helpful to compare my neurodivergency with my Japanese identity. My teachers in Japan knew that certain successes or failures of students could be attributed to their *Japaneseness*, i.e., to having been educated in Japan with Japanese as a first language. However, these teachers were much less aware of how a student's neurodivergency might affect that student's performance. Whenever I showed some atypical behaviors, such as stuttering, showing nervousness, or making mistakes in time management, a professor unaware of my neurodivergency could easily attribute such behavior to poor English, unpreparedness or laziness. For some teachers, my savant performance on certain tasks led them to have mistakenly high expectations of me for other tasks. For other teachers, my poor performance on certain tasks led them to have mistakenly low expectations of me in other contexts. With rare exception, my teachers did not try to understand my successes and failures in terms of my neurodivergency.

In sum, my PDD behavioral quirks and language savant abilities made me different in almost all the situations in the master's program from my neurotypical peers, but my professors did not usually appreciate this difference; thus, they provided no accommodations. By not disclosing my neurodivergency, I made matters worse by denying my professors a good reason to accommodate my atypicality. Still, despite the fact that there was no appropriate official accommodation, I was greatly helped thanks to organic, informal, and natural moral support by professors and classmates. This is reminiscent of how Crenshaw (1989) was helped by her black male friend who walked her to the back door of his exclusive Harvard club. Help and support from our friends is welcome, but a

good policy would be better.

Many teachers work in programs without accommodation policies or with inadequate policies; however, all teachers can strive to use informal natural accommodations for their atypical students, just as some of my professors did for me, by providing opportunities for their neurodivergent students. This is more easily done when teachers try to notice students' needs, because a student may not be able to express them. Having developed an ability to notice and accommodate neurodivergency, those teachers, when they have the opportunity, can then help craft or improve their departmental or institutional policies. Also, whether a student is being taught first-language or academic language (e.g., English) skills, the teachers should help students also learn general and transferable communication skills, which can be very helpful for certain neurodivergent learners. With or without the backing of an institutional accommodation policy, the teacher can always strive to be a good mentor regarding communication.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper discussed the role of cultural and social factors in my own learning and use of languages (i.e., English and Japanese) in a graduate school context. That experience made my impairment in communication obvious, yet good mentorship and friendship helped me grow as a communicator. Because academic and professional development is a holistic matter, these findings suggest that universities should note the importance, not only of teaching languages per se, but also of accommodation in human communication in general.

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Author Bio

Yasushi Miyazaki is an Adjunct Research Fellow at Intelligent Blockchain + Innovation Research Center, Kwansei Gakuin University. With an academic background in English, sociolinguistics, and policy science, Dr. Miyazaki's research interests include policy issues in disability studies, discourse analysis, neurodiversity, and technology for people with disabilities. yasushi.miyazaki@gmail.com

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