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Is a ‘zero’ always a ‘zero’? From ‘blank-learners’ to ‘maieutic teachers’

MARIOTTI, Marcella
Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

HOSOKAWA, Hideo
Waseda University
Institute for Language Culture Education
Yatsugatake Academia

ICHISHIMA, Noriko
Akita University

Abstract

As has been stressed already, dialoguing can be considered a milestone for identity and community formation (Hosokawa, Otsuji, Mariotti 2016; Council of Europe Language Policy Division 2009). Previous studies have shown how a classroom of Japanese language can be a stimulus to dialogue and reciprocal exchange of values for all participants, no matter their native language (Miyao 2011; Shimazu 2017). Still, several fundamental questions have remained unanswered: is such a formative dialogue feasible in a class of zero beginners of Japanese learners? How can they step up from ‘words-only communication’ to the construction of meaningful sentences, during a workshop of 15 meetings focusing on ‘contents – self-expression – citizenship formation’ instead of classes focusing on grammar only? Previous research on zero-beginners of Japanese language as second language (Kim, Take, Furuya 2010) has shown that this is feasible, but what kind of processes do learners go through? Does having the same native language influence these processes? If so, in which way? Who has the right to evaluate the outcome of such an ‘identity formation’ process, and how is this done? We decided to pursue these questions through a joint research project: Action Research Zero. We had conducted it at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice between September and December 2016, together with 15 voluntary learners and 4 tutors. This panel provides answers to the above research questions, showing that even dialoguing between absolute beginners of Japanese Language can reach the very aim of identity formation, but only if teachers serve as ‘maieutic facilitator’.*

Keywords: Zero beginners, critical pedagogy, citizenship formation, evaluation criteria, facilitator, dialogue activity

【キーワード】 ゼロビギナー、クリティカルペダゴジー、評価基準、対話活動、市民性形成

* ARZ workshop has been funded by Akita University and Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, as a joint research project conducted by M. Mariotti and N. Ichishima, and supervised by H. Hosokawa. We thank all participating students and tutors for their collaboration and understanding of the research aims.

Action Research Zero (ARZ) Workshop: Is an ‘absolute beginner’ learner really a ‘zero-beginner’?

MARIOTTI, Marcella
Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

Abstract

This paper presents the Action Research Zero (ARZ) project, demonstrating the feasibility of *Sōgo katsudō gata nihongo kyōiku* (Japanese Language Education through Global Activities) as a place (*ba*) of transformative dialogue in a class of ‘zero’ beginners of Japanese. Critical pedagogy and a transformative, i.e., problem-posing education, can empower students to individuate and reflect upon ideologies and practices that make them or other individuals feel oppressed and restrained. The ARZ Project meant to raise students’ awareness of their being the source of course contents and as such not the ‘zero-beginners’ of Japanese. The data show how students step up from ‘words-only communication’ to the construction of meaningful sentences, that is to say, how self-produced contents (self-expression) induce ‘transformative awareness’, turning both students and teachers into responsible actors with respect to their own (and others’) life and learning path. I argue that such positionality can support (a) the endeavor to compose sentences in an unknown language that are comprehensible by peers, (b) the endeavor to understand what peers have expressed in a previously unknown foreign language, (c) the discrepancy between grammar items non-native speakers need for self-expression of, and the respective order of relevance in textbooks of Japanese mainly based on native-speakers’ corpora.

Keywords: reciprocal maieutic pedagogy, Japanese language education, *sōgo katsudō gata nihongo kyōiku*, Action Research Zero ARZ, facilitator

【キーワード】 相互助産婦的教育、実践研究、クリティカルペダゴジー、日本語教育、総合活動型日本語教育、ゼロビギナー、ファシリテーター

1 Introduction

Based on the first presentation of the panel—*Is a ‘zero’ always a ‘zero? From ‘blank-learners’ to ‘maieutic teachers’*—this paper introduces the Action Research Zero project (hereafter, ARZ). The project aimed at demonstrating the feasibility of *sōgo katsudō gata nihongo kyōiku* activity (Japanese Language Education through Global Activities, Hosokawa 2004) as a place (*ba*) of ‘transformative dialogue’ even in a class of ‘zero’ beginners of Japanese. After my 2013 presentation on Japanese language activities in non-native speakers’ classes outside Japan, drawing on case studies in 2010, 2012 and 2013, it was pointed out that Japanese Language Education through Global Activities would work only in advanced, but not beginner-level Japanese classes. Hosokawa received similar criticism although such classes had already been taught at Waseda University as *Kangaeru I*.

During Ichishima’s one-year research stay at Ca’ Foscari University, we took up the challenge and designed an ARZ workshop for the zero beginners of Japanese as foreign language, inviting Hosokawa to give a lecture (Hosokawa 2016) and teach the workshop’s first week. This was the very first attempt at a zero-beginner course outside a completely Japanese-speaking environment, i.e., the context that non-native learners are usually recommended to immerse themselves into by going to Japan. While the spread of online contents in Japanese now questions such premise of foreign language education, foreign language education still contrasts to second language education due to the frequency of the

exposure to the target language. In Europe, it is common that university students who learn Japanese still live the most of their daily and academic lives using a European language. In this sense, the ARZ workshop is considered a unique attempt.

It has been argued that critical pedagogy and transformative/problem-posing education can empower students to individuate, reflect upon and question ideologies and practices that make them or other individuals feel oppressed and restrained (Freire 1968; Gramsci 1975; Dolci 2012). ARZ meant to raise students' awareness of the fact that they themselves are the source of course contents and as such not 'zero-beginners' of Japanese. The data presented below indicate how students step up from 'words-only communication' to the construction of meaningful sentences (Holliday & Macdonald 2019), that is to say, how self-produced contents (self-expression) induces 'transformative awareness', turning both students and teachers into responsible social actors with respect to their own (and others') life and learning path (Mariotti 2017). The study was guided by the following questions: how can such positionality facilitate the endeavor to compose sentences in an unknown language that are comprehensible by peers, and the endeavor to understand what peers express in a previously unknown foreign language; is there any discrepancy between grammar items non-native speakers need for self-expression, and the respective order of relevance in textbooks of Japanese mainly edited by native-speakers?

2 Action Research Zero Workshop

The ARZ project, which has already been described in detail elsewhere (Mariotti & Ichishima 2017), shall first be briefly summarized. Targeted at the 'zero beginners' of Japanese at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, only eight students were initially meant to be involved, but due to high request, we allowed 15 students to participate in the workshop and opened a call for 4 tutors to follow each group and intermediate between the three teachers and the 15 students.

The project was conducted in parallel to the curricular university courses between September and December 2016, in 16 meetings lasting at least 90 and at most 120 minutes each. The overall objective was to develop critical awareness as responsibility for one's own choice of theme. The intermediate aim was to have the students write an essay in Japanese on '... and myself' to be disclosed online, and this was to be reached through practical objectives such as (a) composing a motivational text, (b) dialoguing with each other inside and outside of the classroom, (c) giving a presentation, (d) completing the final essay, and (e) evaluating one's own as well as one's peers' activities.¹

Except for one tutor, who had previous experience with a similar course and due to work impediment was eventually replaced by a non-experienced master student, the tutors were not briefed about the method which the teachers employed, nor did they write essays, as they were somehow distinct from the students, or shared with students their own questioning, values or feelings. This configuration may have contributed to tutors' appearance as distant and powerful, superior with regard to vocabulary and reliable as translators. Three were non-native speakers of Japanese and master students interested in foreign language education, while one was a native speaker and private teacher of Japanese without any formal affiliation with the hosting institution.

The 16 meetings were scheduled for:

- Meetings 1 to 4: the discussion and initial write-up of a **motivational** theme – , 5 meetings in 5 days for a total of about 10 hours, with Hideo Hosokawa as leading teacher and Noriko Ichishima and myself as facilitators;

- Meetings 5 to 10: the presentation of report aims and evaluation criteria: (1) originality, (2) reception of others' argumentation, (3) logical consistency; the continuation of the write-up of the motivational theme (discussing, listening, writing, reading) – once a week, with follow-up online interaction (teachers: Ichishima and Mariotti);
- Meetings 11 to 13: dialoguing inside and outside of the classroom and reports on thought changes following the dialogue – once a week, with follow up online interaction (teachers: Ichishima and Mariotti);
- Meeting 14: discussing evaluation criteria – (teachers: Ichishima and Mariotti);
- Meetings 15 and 16: presentations and class evaluation –
- After Christmas vacations: completion of the final reports (see list below) and publication online (see the reference list for the link) with the following titles²:

1. ゲンダイアートと私 (*Gendai āto to watashi*, 'Contemporary art and Myself')
2. ドラムと私 (*Doramu to watashi*, 'Drum and Myself')
3. バスケットボールと私 (*Basuketto bōru to watashi*, 'Basketball and Myself')
4. 日本のしと私 (*Nihon no shi to watashi*, 'Japanese poetry and Myself')
5. ストリーを書くことと私 (*Sutorii o kaku koto to watashi*, 'Writing stories and Myself')
6. ファッションと私 (*Fasshon to watashi*, 'Fashion and Myself')
7. 私の猫と私 (*Watashi no neko to watashi*, 'My cat and Myself')
8. 星を見ることと私 (*Hoshi o miru koto to watashi*, 'Watching stars and Myself')
9. 描くことと私 (*Egaku koto to watashi*, 'Drawing and Myself')
10. ロックの反抗と私 (*Rokku no hankō to watashi*, 'Resistance rock and Myself')
11. ゆびわものがたりと私 (*Yubiwa monogatari to watashi*, 'Lord of the Rings and Myself')
12. パリのルブルビじゅつかんと私 (*Pari no Ruburu bijutsukan* 'The Louvre of Paris and Myself')
13. ハリーポッターと私 (*Harī Pottā to watashi*, 'Harry Potter and Myself')
14. 空手と私 (*Karate to watashi*, 'Karate and Myself')
15. だいにじせかいいたいせんと私 (*Dainiji sekai taisen to watashi*, 'World War II and Myself' (this only paper was not delivered).

3 From words to sentences: an empowerment process?

Those students who attended the course, did it as an extra-curriculum effort, i.e., without being awarded credit points for the additional ARZ homework. Their main motivation was to learn the Japanese language, which helped to cope with difficulties in study burden. As shown in figure 2, S1³, for example, was writing to his group tutor late at night, from 22:10 to 1:23, between the second day and the third day of classes. The extra effort is shown in the interview excerpt to S3 below, from a Master thesis that examined the workshop.

'...so I had to open up trying to write things too. Clearly the moment when you are asked to write in another **language you find yourself thinking about it a lot more** so you can't say 'Ok I write this sentence, it takes me three seconds and done, I will not look at it anymore. I wrote it and hopefully nobody will talk to me about it.'. Instead, in our case, you have to translate it, so you can even spend ten minutes on it, and then **you must be sure you want to talk about it**. That was quite difficult, but then, let's say, I somehow got used to it and took a little confidence. Even with the tutor everything went smoothly. It was **certainly heavy**, because we were also asked for tasks with a deadline, that **added to the tasks**

received from curriculum classes, made the burden a little heavier, but in the end I managed to do many things that left me satisfied, even not only from the language point of view.’

(Arleoni 2017:76; transl. from Italian into English by author)⁴

Sitting in circle on movable chairs equipped with a writing table, the first day began with the students listening to the teachers’ explanation of the course in Japanese and Italian. The activities were centered on choosing the theme students would like to talk and write about, starting from teachers’ and students’ self-presentations in Japanese in a way that would bring up the most degree of individual involvement through the expression ‘I like (*suki desu*)...’.

Respecting the student as a person as well as their individual language usage and self-generated contents knowledge, no grammar was explained or corrected; rather, the process of language acquisition was stimulated through questions about the theme-contents, posed to each learner by teachers, tutors or peers, in class and also online.

An example can be seen in Figure 1, where S1 writes his first self-introduction, and T1 asks him ‘What do you like to do with your friends?’, showing she read his writing and wanted to know more about what he liked and wrote in the last line: ‘I like to see the flow with friend’. Thanks to T1’s interest, S1 tried to better express himself so to be understood, and by 1:23 am he managed to complete the last sentence with content more meaningful to him and his reader: ‘On Saturdays I play basketball with my friends’.

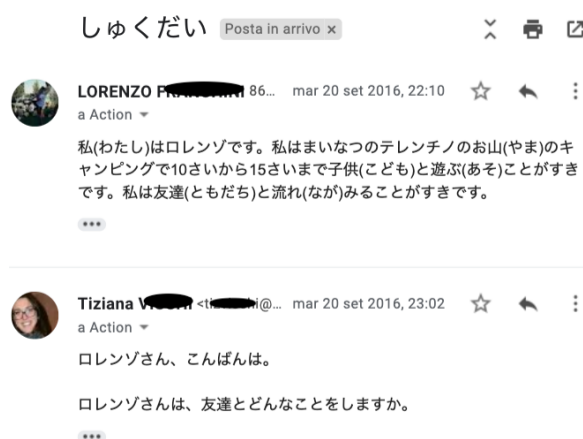


Figure 1: ARZ day 2 S1 and F1 email exchange

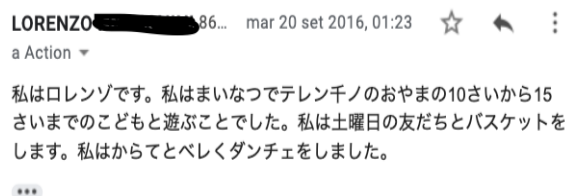


Figure 2: ARZ day 2, S1 answers to F1 modifying

S1 (Figure 1): ‘I am S1. Every year, in summer I like to play with children between 10 and 15 during the summer camp in Trentino mountains. I like to see the flow with friends’.

T1: ‘Good evening S1. What do you like to do with your friends?’

strengthening relationships with others, not based on role-play or textbook contents, but on actually ongoing interpersonal encounters.

Interviewer: Ok, what are the things you have dealt with best?

Student: This is a difficult question, I think in the end to talk about my way of writing, [which is] my theme, yes, it was more difficult than ... maybe, to write in Japanese, even if I think it was the easiest thing too, because actually **I did not know the Japanese language, but I did know the things I wrote**, yes, so expressing those was easier.

(Arleoni 2017:78)

It is not the teacher anymore who chooses the content and who possesses the correct answer and neither does the textbook play the authoritative role. But the learners themselves take the center of stage choosing, proposing and engaging in communicating a theme-content initially known only to themselves, acquiring the right and the power to speak and write it. Instead of a hierarchical top-down between omniscient teacher and illiterate student their relation becomes horizontal, mediated by tutors who are closer to the students, and also bottom-up, because ‘teaching’ here depends on what the students have to say.

4 Transformative awareness

The process and the will to make others understand a personal issue necessarily result in the need for the student to reflect on what they want to convey and why it is so important for them to choose to go through the difficulties of communicating it to others in a foreign language. Transformation here is in becoming aware of one’s own responsibility in choosing a theme that nobody can correct, except oneself, while newly developing it through repeated interaction, that is, dialogue, with others. This is evident in the interview excerpt below.

‘[With other group member] now we have a slightly deeper relationship of friendship knowing each other more, but I must say that although I am an introverted type, **in a small reality like that of the group it was still easy enough to open up to others**, also because at some point , after they ask you 10 times ‘Dōshite? Dōshite? [Why? Why?]’ in finally end up in saying it [the reason beyond your choice], so it was also fun I must say’. (Arleoni 2017:80)

Teachers and tutors are not judges anymore but allies, guides or even learner themselves, while students become teachers in a mutually responsible relationship. Such transformation is not without risks, nor does it happen ‘naturally’. As indicated below, teachers still appear somehow distant from students, but tutors can more easily become allies and guides, so they should be professionally trained toward a maieutic competence.

‘... it came to me spontaneously also for a question of age and also because of the teacher-student power relation, to turn around to the tutor and ask, because even the tutor being closer to you probably already knows what your doubt is, instead asking the teacher who is more mature and in any case a teacher, you take off embarrassment by turning directly to the tutor and asking him’. (Arleoni 2016:79)

It is through dialogue, conducted online, inside and outside of the classroom, that S1’s motivational text (Figure 1) gradually changed and developed into the final report; from the initial 88 characters it increased up to 841 characters, because S1 felt the need to better

articulate himself in order to make others, and himself, better understand the reasons of his choices. The full Japanese version can be accessed online under ‘ARZ workshop project’ (see link in the References).

「星(ほし)と私」

私は毎年(まいとし)の夏(なつ)にお山(おやま)へキャンピングに友達(ともたち)といきます。夜(よる)、我々は地面(しめん)の上(うえ)に休んで(やす)、音楽(おんか)をききます。そこ我々は星(ほし)を見ます(み)。その瞬間(しゅんかん)に私はしあわせて(す)。私はこわくない(す)。私の問題(もんだい)を消します(け)。私は自由(しゆう)を感じ(かん)ます(かん)。その星空(ほしそら)の下(した)に、私はすてき人生(しんせい)を思います(おも)。人生のいみを思います。

この特別な(とくへつ)夜(よる)に我々の夢(ゆめ)は星(ほし)にたくします。私の考え(かんがえ)は宇宙(うちゅう)と星(ほし)へ飛び(と)ます(と)。私は無敵(むてき)を感じ(かん)ます(かん)。[…]

I go to camping in the mountains with friends every year. At night, we rest on the ground and listen to music. And then we watch the stars. At that moment, I am happy. I'm not scared. All my problems get erased. I feel freedom. Under that starry sky, I think of a wonderful life. I think of the meaning of life.

On this special night, our dream hits the stars. My thoughts fly to the universe and the stars. I feel invincible [...]

In the process, the necessary grammar was not aligned with the curricular course (see Table 1), but it followed an individual learning path, and this revealed a discrepancy between grammar items needed and thus important for self-expression and the ‘order’ in which they appear in the most common textbooks or manuals of Japanese, written by both native or non-native teachers. In actuality, while in week 1 the curricular courses offered students lessons about how to write *hiragana* and *katakana* and memorize words commonly linked to a classroom environment such as ‘please write...’, ‘please listen’, and ‘please say it again’, ARZ tutors and teachers were asking students about their interests through expressions like: *nani ga suki desuka?* ‘What do you like?’, -- *ga suki dewa nai desu ka?* ‘You do not like ...?’, *itariago de nan to iimasuka?* ‘How do you say it in Italian?’. These are not just sentence patterns (forms), but expressions of real interest (contents) that can become the first step to a personal relationship between class members, tutors and teachers. At the same time, ARZ students like S1 exhibited responsibility about the issues (contents) they wanted to share, and from the very first three hours of the first day they experienced the need to use individually tailored grammatical structures, e.g., nominalizers like *koto* ‘the fact of doing’, conjunctions like *dakara* ‘therefore’, *node* ‘since’, *to* ‘with’, *kara* ‘from’, *made* ‘up to’, counters and classifiers as *-kan* (book volumes) and *-hiki* (animals), or the conjugated past verb, like *‘shimashita*’ ‘did’ (Table 1).

ACTION RESEARCH ZERO (extra-curricular activity)		LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND SOCIETY OF ASIA AND MEDITERRANEAN AFRICA, Japanese curriculum A.Y. 2016/2017 (curricular activity)		
	PROFESSORS AND TUTORS	STUDENTS	TEACHER	FIRST WEEK CONTENTS (13.09.2016 – 16.09.2016)
Day 1 19.09.2016 15:00 – 18:00 (3 hours, 2 1.5 hour slots)	-私は〇〇です (watashi wa xx desu) (I am xx) -これはなんですか (kore wa nan desu ka) (What is this?) -〇〇が(大)好きです (xx ga (dai) suki desu) (I like/really like xx) - 〇〇が(あまり)好きではありません (xx ga (amari) suki dewa arimasen) (I don't (really) like xx) - イタリア語で何と言います/ですか (itariago de nan to iimasu ka / desu ka) (How do you say it in Italian?) - 何が好きですか。(nani ga desu ka.) (What do you like?) -好きじゃないです (suki janai desu) (I don't like (it))	-子供と遊ぶこと(が)好きです (kodomo to asobu koto (ga) suki desu) (I like playing with kids) -〇〇から〇〇まで (xx kara xx made) (From xx to xx) -Counters (e.g. 巻 kan 'volume' – 匹 hiki 'small animals') -Time adverbs (like 毎日 mainichi 'every day') -だから (dakara 'so, therefore') -ので (node 'because of...') -がいる (ga iru 'to be (of animate objects)') - suspensive form で (de) -でも (demo 'but') -と違って (to chigatte 'unlike...')	a. module C 13.09.2016 (1.5 hours) b. module C 14.09.2016 (1.5 hours)	-文字の話 (moji no hanashi) (discourse about characters) - ひらがな「ん」まで: よう音、長音、濁音などはしていません (hiragana 'n' made: yōon, chōon, dakuon nado wa shite imasen) (hiragana until 'n': 'yōon', 'chōon', 'dakuon' excluded) -簡単な挨拶 (kantan na aisatsu) (simple greetings) - 教室用語: 「書いて読んで聞いて言 って開けて見てください」や「宿題」 「もう一回」などよく使う言葉 (kyōshitsu yōgo: 'kaite yonde kiite itte akete mite kudasai' ya 'shukudai' 'mō ikkai' nado yoku tsukau kotoba) (classroom lexicon: frequently used terms like 'please write, read, listen, say, open, look at' and 'homework', 'one more time')

Table 1: Discrepancy between textbook and student needs (Bartolommeoni 2017) Adapted and translated into English by the author.

5 Conclusions: A critical and reciprocal maieutic approach never starts from zero

Where did the necessity of using such grammar and words, not usually considered 'zero-beginner level' come from? As the interpersonal and reciprocal horizontal approach introduced above indicates, 'zero' beginners cannot be considered just 'empty boxes to be filled', since they are the actual holders and developers of class theme-contents. If given the central position in class activities, they constantly go beyond what they are taught in curricular courses. This is possible because they have tools, such as online dictionaries, references, and translators that can be freely accessed in and outside the classroom time. These tools provide students with control over what, when and why they study, enabling a non-linear, and as such democratic, type of learning that empowers each learner by responding to their individual needs (Nassini 2020).

However, the core motivation springs from the deep desire to live together with others, sharing who we are and welcoming who the others are in a reciprocal process. This 'others' can be dialogue partners, friends, relatives, but also teachers, tutors and peers, with whom students in the ARZ workshop chose to share part of their time, efforts, emotions and values. In so doing, participants actively negotiated each other's fluid identities through dialogue, and accepted the potential of a still unknown common path (Ichishima 2014; Hosokawa 2019).

Although impossible to teach, as Hosokawa underlines in the second paper of this panel, accepting the unpredictable contents that arise day by day from the student-teacher and student-student relationship, and that takes away the possibility and the power to know the right answers from teachers, is a **decision** that can enable a mutually transformative process. Precisely, this is our responsibility as teachers. Such decision may occur while dialoguing

with the partner in front of us, and since it will always be situated in a specific historical moment, as long as we consider ourselves an active part of the present society, it will always be a political choice and action. The question then is whether to ‘dis-empower learners’, letting them hinge on a native teacher’s correction and acknowledgment, and in so doing taking away from them the right to speak and to investigate their ideas and values during a course, or to empower them by fostering their motivation to dialogue through a sort of reciprocal maieutic, in which asked questions would increase one’s own and others’ critical **awareness and responsibility about choices**, without discouraging, or **without making them lose confidence in their own thinking strength**.

As described by the student in the interview quoted below, in such a critical and reciprocal maieutic approach the role of tutors or facilitators is of extreme relevance, in regard to developing together with the student their theme issues through appropriate, confidence-building questions, as well as the creation of a sense of community through the decentralization of teachers’ power.

Interviewer: And in the workshop what do you think were the **things that helped** you open up? Classmates? The tutor? The teacher?

Student: Well the tutor, first of all because s/he asked the questions and, at least my tutor, was able to **make us feel much more comfortable**, in the sense that while putting the finger in the wound or saying, for example ‘You didn’t talk about this enough’ was able to **make you feel a person of value**, in the sense that **you were writing something that was worth carrying on**, the work we were doing has never been devalued. I always talk about content, because the language has put a little of embarrassment, in the sense that sometimes, if we said, ‘Did you mean this?’ - ‘No I wanted to say this’, there the misunderstandings took off. But **the tutor I think was fundamental**, that is, without a tutor I don’t think I would have written all those things, because of course I cannot say that companions hindered the job, or did not help, but dealing with peers is much more difficult than dealing with someone else. If you are talking about something with a more adult, or in any case more mature person who is, let’s say, outside from your world, it is also easier. With a peer is more difficult because it lives your own reality but in a different way, therefore it is more difficult for me to relate.

(Arleoni 2017, 77)

As sociologist of reciprocal maieutic, Danilo Dolci pointed out, ‘The maieutic coordinator is an expert in the art of asking’ (Dolci & Amico 2012; 30). However, this kind of teacher-student relationship can become empowering only if teachers and tutors question themselves too and share and go through the same questioning process with the students. The social interaction which is dialoguing can activate reciprocal identity building inter-personal dynamics, and the medium—the foreign language—can sometime inform and shape the message, and vice versa (see interview at S3 in paragraph 2).

As far as the ARZ case study is concerned, this has not been fully achieved. It remains to be shown how teachers and tutors formation can be carried out through an informed participatory action research, in order to avoid traditional induction methods that tend to reproduce teaching as transmission of expertise in a top-down manner rather than using

critical reflection that can lead to change, progress and reflection on practice (Ginns et al. 2001).

¹ For the theoretical background of this workshop see the panel paper, Hideo Hosokawa ‘Teaching what cannot be taught’.

² The indication of the Japanese-language titles here follows the students’ version; therefore, *kanji* are occasionally replaced by *kana*.

³ Student names are original only if they agreed to publish their reports online. The quotations in this paper are drawn from part of their reports.

⁴ All quotations from here onwards are translated from Japanese or from Italian by the author.

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