Heritage Language Learning in light of Japanese Canadian Internment: Developing an Oral History Informed Pedagogy

Japanese language learning environments in Canada are traditionally oriented towards a Japan-bound conception of identity and language use; however, for Japanese Canadians who have a family history of Internment, dispossession, and forced relocation during and after WWII, a shift towards a historically informed Japanese as a heritage language (JHL) is needed. There is a sense of urgency in engendering this shift, as direct witnesses are beginning to disappear. In this study, I draw upon the oral history archives in the two largest Japanese Canadian cultural institutions in Canada, The Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto, Ontario, and the National Nikkei Museum and Cultural Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia. My review of the oral histories involved over 63 hours of audio and video recordings, spanning a period of almost 40 years, from 1976 to 2013. The primary recurrent theme is the progressive loss of Japanese in favour of English across the Issei, Nisei, and Sansei generations. Utilizing Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (Bourdieu, 1991; Swartz, 1997), I conducted an analysis of habitus and the field of intergenerational communication, revealing shifts in cultural capital intergenerationally and the subsequent assimilation of habitus; this gives rise to the second recurrent theme, the breakdown of intergenerational communication, resulting in obstacles to the transmission of collective memories of the family and discontinuities in cultural identity. The pedagogical implication of these results is that heritage language learning should not be approached from a second or additional language orientation, i.e., not from a Japan-bound orientation towards language use, but from a family-oriented approach. Potential pedagogical responses will be presented; feedback from Japanese language educators and administrators is encouraged.

SPEAKER

CHRISTOPHER GRADIN

Christopher Gradin is a PhD Candidate in the Language and Literacies Education program. His research centers around the role of history in heritage language learning for minoritized learners. In his 20 years of teaching experience, he has taught EFL in Japan, ESL, and EAP at the post-secondary level. His research interests include identity negotiation, intergenerational communication, teacher education, and professional development.