



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

Master's Degree Programme  
in Language and Civilisation of Asia  
and Mediterranean Africa

Final Thesis

**Aiming at Student Autonomy  
and Empowerment in  
Foreign Language Learning**

A Case Study of Tutoring Activities for Japanese  
at Ca' Foscari University of Venice

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**Academic Year**

2023 / 2024

# 要旨

ヴェネツィア・カフオスカリ大学は、教室での学びと自立的な学びを結びつけているチューター制度を設けている。本論文では、批判的教育のクリティカル言語教育(Critical Language Pedagogy)に基づき、批判的思考の促進を目指しているチューター補習を分析する。このチューター活動は、言語力の向上だけでなく、市民形成とエンパワーメント、自律の育成を注視した実践に沿って計画されていた。ケーススタディは、1年生の日本語専攻の学部生を対象とし、ワークシートやアジア・北アフリカ研究学部の NoLBrick 研究グループが開発したオンラインツールを使って文法のアクティブラーニングを行った。

本論文のリサーチクエスションは以下の二点である。まず第一、「なぜ高等教育における言語学習において自律を促進すべきなのか。具体的に、なぜ教師からの自立的な学習と他者との対話とつながりを可能にするような言語教育実践を推進するのか」。そして、第二に、「ピア・チュータリングのような教育実践は、自律とエンパワーメントの育成にどのように貢献できるのか。特に、ピア・チュータリングのような教育実践は、批判的で自立的な学習の発展をどのように促進できるのか。」という問いに答えを提供しようとする。

そのために、第1章では、本論文の位置づけと実践の背景を明らかにするように理論を導入する。クリティカル言語教育と、批判的な応用言語学(Critical Applied Linguistics)と Translingualism という理論、及びカフオスカリ大学での NoLBrick 研究グループを紹介する。更に、カフオスカリ大学での実践の文脈をヨーロッパの中で位置づけ、カフオスカリ大学でのチューター補習を簡単に述べる。

第2章では、クリティカル言語教育と自律の先行研究や、オンラインツールとチューター補習についての理論と NoLBrick に関する理論をまとめる。そこで、本文の基礎となる自律とエンパワーメントの定義を明らかにする。「自律」は技術的なスキルではなく、決定し、社会的責任を持ち、批判的な意識を持つと定義されている (Raya&Vieira, 2021, p.84)。その目的はエ

ンパワーメントであり、それが周りの状況について検討し、他人と対話を通じて社会変革を行うことである。

第3章では、分析の方法を紹介する。チューター補習の活動の概要を紹介しながら、チューターと補習の活動と同時に行われた言語教育のクラスも紹介する。そのクラスは、NoLBrick という言語学アプローチをフォローし、学部1年生も体験した。学生4人にインタビューを行い、そのインタビューをテーマティック・アナリシス法を通じて分析した。

第4章では、インタビューの分析結果を紹介する。結果は「チューターへの頼り」「学生期待」、「自律と効率」、「対抗」の四のテーマに分けられた。次にディスカッションでは、それを理論を通じて分析し、学生はRaya&Vieira (2021) の定義に従って自律的ではないという点に注目する。分析では、インタビューした学生の立場を明らかにし、自律について訪ねると、学生たちはチューターや大学に頼る傾向があることがわかった。彼らにとっての「自律」とは、教室の内容を効率的に学習するという意味で、権威から得られた標準を満たすためのツールとなった。

最後に、第5章では、結論を述べる。リサーチクエスチョンに答え、まず第一に、理論とインタビューを分析したうえ、言語教育の分野では、文化と言語を固定したイメージで評価する恐れがあり、現代の社会では批判的な考え方によって周りを見直す必要があることがわかった。第二に、先行研究(Bussu&Contini, 2023)によってチューター活動には批判的なアプローチを当てはめる可能性はあるものの、社会的責任感や批判的な意識を発展することが短期間で現実するのが難しいこともわかった。実際には、制度的な構造や学生の期待が実践を形成する上で重要な役割を果たし、権威や権力関係の再生産につながることもある。ケーススタディは、学生が行動を起こし、主体的な言語学習者になる必要性を認識することの難しさや、制度化された文脈における教育実践としてのピアチュータリングが、共有された知識と共同責任の場の構築を許さなかったことを示している。構造的な理由や現代の高等教育では、批判的なチューター活動をどう進めるべきか、いくつかの提案が挙げられるが、そこは今後の課題である。

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Transformative Potential of Language Education

This dissertation is inspired by the assumption that Foreign Language Education (FLE) entails a transformative potential when informed by critical pedagogy practices. This is because learning and teaching foreign languages can serve as a medium for individual and collective identity formation (Mariotti, 2020c), which may lead to reflect upon “oppressive forms of ‘reading the world’”, as suggested by Raya&Vieira (2021), drawing from Freire’s (1970) and Giroux’s (2014) writings. Therefore, pedagogical practices can be interpreted as far from a neutral process related only to classroom utterances, but as a social and political site where dominant perspectives can be perpetuated or questioned.

Although language education and literacy are commonly associated with difference-accepting, welcoming multiculturalism, educators need to be aware of neo-liberal approaches that overlook systemic discrimination and reinforce essentialized images of the Other and the Self within unequal relations of power, also urging students to adopt a critical stance towards issues of domination and oppression (Kubota, 2004). Within this purpose, FLE can be considered a privileged field in education since there is no fixed content, as the post-communication turn and Critical Content-Based Language Education have already demonstrated (Mariotti, 2020c).

For this reason, this dissertation draws from Critical Applied Linguistics, which views language acquisition as connected to larger social inquiries (Pennycook, 2021). The field stems from postmodernist constructionism, which posits knowledge and knowledge transmission through the lens of Foucauldian poststructuralism (Kubota & Miller, 2017) as political, history contingent, and embedded in relations of power.

The main purpose of this analysis is to investigate the significance of pedagogical practices that foster the development of autonomous learning and emancipation from the teacher,

considered beneficial not only for language skills development but also for empowerment and citizenship formation.

That being said, 'empowerment' as interpreted inside the framework of a critical approach to pedagogy by authors like Freire (1970), Giroux (1997, 2011), and MacLaren (2009) has been largely criticised from a feminist pedagogy perspective (see Gore, 1992; Ellsworth, 1992). Positing that "no discourse is inherently liberating or oppressive" (Sawicki, 1988, as in Gore, 1992, p. 60), the aforementioned authors problematize the concept of empowerment as essentially paternalistic. When discussing tutoring activities within the Italian context (see Torre, 2006; Da Re, 2012, 2018; Bonelli, Da Re, 2022; Pintus, Mambriani, 2023), we notice that the term is often used in this broad and general sense. Giving 'power' often implies an agent who empowers a subject, with the final aim of 'success' as seen from an individualistic perspective. Most of the aforementioned seem to relate the term to efficiency and realisation of the self within neo-liberal attitudes to economic growth and bureaucratization, thus seeking to help students to integrate to them.

Critically assessing these assumptions is of pivotal importance in order to frame how this dissertation understands empowerment. Essentially moving away from an individualistic view, this study is based on the idea that empowerment is a collaborative process intertwined with sociological and psychological elements. Empowerment relates to the understanding of reality from a critical point of view by the individual, who questions dominant perspectives, but also to a collective meaning where individuals act together in order to create a more just society (Zimmerman, 2000).

From this perspective, Mariotti (2020a), drawing from Freire (1970), Gramsci (1932), and Dolci (2012), argues that empowerment means allowing individuals the opportunity to "individuate, reflect, and question ideologies and practices that make them, or other individuals feel oppressed and restrained" (p. 241). The author uses the verb 'empower' concerning a reciprocal process of co-construction of responsibility:

Encouraging dialogue through FLE can bring to critical awareness and questioning our world own views while welcoming others, mutually seeing each other as responsible member of the same community/society, empowering both from concretely act toward social integration instead of toward divide. (Mariotti, 2020c, p.3).

Therefore, empowerment from this point of view underscores the importance of social cohesion, dialogue, and collaboration, and aims at 'liberating' both educators and students from hierarchical ways of knowledge transmission. Mariotti (2020a) suggests that the creation of a sense of community is related to the decentralisation of the teachers' power, who goes through the same questioning process, allowing for "reciprocal identity building interpersonal dynamics" (p. 248). It is therefore implied that the commitment and responsibility to dialogue is mutual and shared and that teachers are not superior givers of power to struggling inferiors, but are all the same individuals constrained by their location in institutions and social regulations, bringing into the classroom their "own learned racism, fat oppression<sup>1</sup>, classism, ableism, or sexism" (Ellsworth, 1992).

Liberation from the "teach-being taught" paradigm (quoting by Mariotti, Hosokawa, and Ichishima, 2022) is therefore deemed an essential element for learners to question previous assumptions or given hierarchies, taking back the lead on their learning path. More importantly, becoming autonomous learners allows us to question previous knowledge-transmission processes and entails the possibility of accessing non-mainstream and non-dominant knowledge, free from top-down transmissive logic. Within this dissertation, it is also believed to leave more space for what cannot be done individually, such as dialogue, cohesion, social

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<sup>1</sup> Although the reference dates back to the '90s, it is relevant to notice that there is a growing body of literature relating weight-based oppression to formal education. The schooling system is seen as a site in which fat-phobia and other dominant discourses about weight are being perpetuated, and scholars are progressively challenging normative assumptions about obesity and fatness in this very context. See, for instance, Cameron&Russel, 2016.

change, and social mobilisation. Therefore, a nuanced approach to learning and teaching can be considered a continuous commitment to dialogue and understanding, producing practices that induce collectivity instead of neo-liberal individualism and competition. Dialogue is not only a tool for mediation and reconciliation, but can also show contradictions, differences, and social conflicts. Within popular education (referring to Paulo Freire, but also Italian pedagogues like Milani and Dolci during the second half of the last century), dialogue translates to conscience-raising and collective transformation (Mayo, Vittoria, 2017).

To this extent, this dissertation will also explore *how* pedagogical practices can facilitate the development of a critical and autonomous learning, taking into account a case study involving peer tutoring to small groups of first-year undergraduate Japanese language students at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (from here onwards, Ca' Foscari University). The students attended weekly meetings and engaged in active learning of Japanese grammar through worksheets and discussions, also using specific online tools developed by the Department of Asian and North African Studies.

The research questions underlying the study are: 1) Why promote autonomy and independence in language learning in Higher Education? More specifically, why promote language educational practices that foster independence from the teacher and autonomous learning, allowing for dialogue and connection with others and promoting social cohesion? 2) How can pedagogical practices like peer tutoring contribute to the development of autonomy and empowerment? In particular, how can pedagogical practices like peer tutoring facilitate the development of critical and autonomous learning, aimed at fostering reflection and action towards oppressive systems of knowledge transmission?

To attempt to answer the above-mentioned questions, the first chapter of this work will introduce relevant background information and the theoretical framework behind this analysis while presenting the context of the case study. The second chapter will further elaborate on the background information that will be laid out in this introduction, reviewing previous literature concerning Critical Pedagogy in Language Education and autonomy in the same field, but also the role of online tools and a framework for peer tutoring. Moving forward, the



following chapter will describe the methodology of the analysis. The data has been gathered through four semi-structured interviews, which have been analysed through a thematic approach. The fourth chapter will present the findings, which have been identified between four main thematic areas: students' dependency on the teacher/tutor and the programme; students' expectations; autonomy interpreted as efficiency; competition, which occurrence was not anticipated by the research questions or the interviews' structure. These findings will further be analysed in relation to previous literature and other case studies which employed a critical approach to language learning, highlighting differences and similarities. Finally, the last chapter will lay out the conclusions of this dissertation by answering the research questions. Both the literature review and the interviews' analysis will be used to express the importance of fostering a critical approach to language education within Higher Education, asserting the limitation of this analysis and proposing pathways for future research.

## 1.2 Why Autonomous Language Learning?

For a long time, bilingualism has been influenced by an epistemological view of language as a discrete, fixed system, stemming from structuralist linguistics, emphasising the 'additive' aspect of learning another language (Garcia&Wei, 2014). Subsequent interpretations, such as multilingualism and plurilingualism, have been paralleled to poststructuralist and postcolonial thinking within the field of Applied Linguistics (Kubota, 2014). However, viewing language acquisition as the simple act of 'adding up' autonomous linguistic forms has been addressed as limited (Garcia&Wei, 2014), and these theories have also been criticised as lacking a concrete perspective on practice, losing their transformative potential (Kubota, 2014).

To go beyond this vision, translanguaging stresses the importance of the complexity and flexibility of language usage to enhance meaning-making and communication. Theorising a fluid vision of communication, translanguaging entails creating practices that "make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories, and releases histories and understanding that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained

by nation-states" (Garcia&Wei, 2014, p. 20). A translanguaging space is seen as a place of transformation, which allows for creativity as well as criticality, "as it entails tension, conflict, competition, difference and change in a number of spheres, ranging from ideologies, policies and practices to historical and current contexts" (Wei&Martin, 2009, as in García&Wei, 2014, p. 24). Kubota (2014), commenting on the Multi/Plural turn in Applied Linguistics, suggests that translanguaging theories can translate to "a heteroglossic, dynamic, multilingual pedagogical approach" (p. 4).

This is where critical pedagogical approaches are meant to play a distinctive role in shaping the learner's awareness of societal issues and actively engage within the broader social framework. However, Critical Pedagogy is nothing new: major theorization has been done since the '70s onwards when thinkers like Freire, Giroux, and MacLaren advocated for the political role of Education and the schooling system (Gore, 1992).

Application of Critical Pedagogy in Language Education has initially been applied to English as a Second Language (L2) and English as a Foreign Language (FL) as practices that concerned learners belonging to racial and language minorities or immigrant adult learners in the first case, or however participating from a pool of different backgrounds relative to gender, sexuality, social classes, etc. (Riasati, 2012). Expanding to other languages, Crookes (2010) has observed its applications to the Japanese language, entailing pedagogical practices that relate to power issues in FL learning. The relevance of these works is crucial to the present analysis as it informs critical pedagogical practices involving the Japanese language. Kubota (2003; 2004; 2009; 2014; 2017), Kumagai (2007; 2014; 2015), Otsuji (2015; 2016; 2021), Mariotti (2017; 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2022) are some of the scholars that have explored themes interconnected to Critical Pedagogy in Japanese Language Education and that are precious references for educators in the field.

Autonomy in language learning belongs to this framework and has attracted increasing attention in education research. Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" has long been regarded as prominent and influential. Subsequent interpretations also need to be considered, including Little's (2003), who identifies autonomy

as the learners' ability to understand the purpose of their learning program, accept responsibility, take initiative in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly evaluate their effectiveness, but also as a capacity for "detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little, 1997, p.94). The theoretical background of autonomy in language learning is thoroughly tackled by Benson (2013), who provides a historical overview of this field of study and traces it back to Holec's report for the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, exploring its origins in a relationship between education, individual freedom, and social responsibility. The aforementioned definitions help us frame autonomous learning, but it is crucial to recognise that, while arguing the importance of self-direction and responsibility, they risk presenting autonomy as merely a technical and psychological competence, failing to encompass its political and potentially transformative character (Benson, 2013; Pennycook, 1997). Raya and Vieira (2015; 2017; 2020) further elaborate on this point, arguing for autonomy in language learning as a transformative and empowering practice for both teachers and learners as critical intellectuals and reflective practitioners. Elaborating on this perspective, autonomy from the point of view of the theory of self-determination (Ryan, Deci, 2017) is a psychological need that needs to be met in order to achieve the individual's well-being. Autonomy means being able to take the lead of one's life, but is different from independence, as it does not negate a collective need for relations: it can be understood as a "collective interest in the service of a more democratic life" (Raya&Vieira, 2021, p. 5).

Therefore, autonomous learning can be interpreted as not merely a technical skill associated with individual learning and self-access tools. Learning autonomy and learning autonomously implies a shift in *how* we approach learning, urging critical reflection about the practices and conditions of the learning process itself. To this extent, Benson&Lamb (2021) talk about 'critical' autonomy in a definition that is the standpoint of this dissertation:

The competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond)

educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation. (Raya&Vieira, 2021, p. 84).

Autonomy in language learning is still relevant as policies guiding educators and institutions advocate for “independence of thought, judgement, and action, combined with social skills and responsibility”, quoting the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). However, as Raya&Vieira (2021) state, autonomy in pedagogical practices still occupies a marginal position in language education due to structural conditions and dominant values, so educators promoting autonomy might feel like “swimming against the tide” (p.4). For this reason, it can be argued that there is still a need to further the discussion about the topic and reflect on its applicability within democratic institutions.

In conclusion, autonomy and empowerment can be interpreted as two distinct yet interconnected concepts. Within educational contexts, autonomy implies a development of critical awareness and social responsibility; it underscores the importance of moving beyond hierarchical learning relying on a shift in power dynamics. To a larger extent, it contributes to attain empowerment as a transformative process of social cohesion and participation, leading to the creation of a sense of community through dialogue.

In the next section, I will attempt to introduce the context and the particularity of the case study by presenting and comparing it to similar settings at both European and Italian levels.

### 1.3 Japanese Language Education in Europe and Italy

According to the “Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021” conducted by the Japan Foundation,<sup>2</sup> in Western Europe 1,061 institutions are offering Japanese Language courses, with 2,944 teachers and 89,530 students. The majority of learners study the Japanese language at the Higher Education level. The countries with the majority of institutions, teachers and students are France, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Germany, followed by Italy.<sup>3</sup> Further research into the number of institutions offering the Japanese language as a Major in Europe and awarding a Bachelor’s (BA) Degree, conducted by editing the search engine of the Japan Foundation,<sup>4</sup> reveals 73 institutions located in various nations.

Figure 1 The Top Five Countries with the Highest Number of Institutions, Teachers and Students of the Japanese Language, according to the Japan Foundation Survey Report of 2021 (The Japan Foundation. Survey report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021).

Country and region	2021								Population* (People)
	Institutions (Institutions)	Teachers (People)	Learners (People)	Learners per 100,000 population (People)	Composition by educational stage (Learners) (People)				
					Primary education	Secondary education	Higher education	Non-school education	
France	302	930	29,569	46.0	663	7,402	12,880	8,624	64,300,821
United Kingdom	172	473	14,631	23.1	1,558	3,648	6,573	2,852	63,379,787
Germany	128	353	11,687	14.6	47	1,529	5,480	4,631	80,219,695
Spain	158	404	9,383	20.0	15	21	1,872	7,475	46,815,915
Italy	45	186	8,387	14.1	0	669	6,583	1,135	59,433,744

<sup>2</sup> The Japan Foundation is a cultural Institution with the purpose of “carrying out comprehensive international cultural exchange programs throughout the world”. It also provides global surveys about Japanese language education worldwide every three years with the collaboration of offices, embassies, and consulates.

The Japan Foundation. *About the Japan Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/about/outline/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The Japan Foundation. *Survey report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021*. Retrieved from [https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey2021/All\\_contents\\_r2.pdf#page=15.99](https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey2021/All_contents_r2.pdf#page=15.99)

<sup>4</sup> The Japan Foundation. *Survey 2021: Search engine for institutions offering Japanese-language education*. Retrieved from <https://www.japanese.jpf.go.jp/do/index>

To contextualise Ca' Foscari University with other prominent universities in Japanese area studies in Europe, I have decided to: a) take into consideration the two countries with the higher number of institutions, teachers, and students according to the Japan Foundation, namely France and the United Kingdom; b) within these countries, identify institutions offering Bachelor's programmes majoring in the Japanese language, similar to Ca' Foscari University; and c) select the institutions with the highest concentration of faculty staff researching and teaching Japanese area studies in both countries.

For faculty staff, as contracts and regulations vary between France, the UK and Italy, I have decided to include all staff teaching and researching any subject related to Japanese area studies under any form of legal contract. For France and Italy, I have further distinguished the French roles of 'répétiteur', 'lecteur' and 'maître de langue', along with the Italian 'Collaboratore ed esperto linguistico' (CEL) role, categories that are not present within UK regulations. In France, the three positions require different certifications or previous teaching experience and correspond to different working hours, responsibilities and salaries. The contracts<sup>5</sup> are transitory, essentially lasting a year but renewable, and are governed with specific regulations.<sup>6</sup> In Italy, the CEL contract is instead categorised under the administrative staff regulations, and the contracts can be both short-term and long-term. What these roles have in common is their function in fostering students' language competencies, with responsibilities ranging from conversational practices and conducting classes to testing students, with one important eligibility criterion being native in the language they are going to

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<sup>5</sup> For reference, see a call for application by INALCO for the 'répétiteur' and 'lecteur' role. Retrieved from <https://www.inalco.fr/sites/default/files/2024-04/Appel%20%C3%A0%20candidatures%20enseignants%20contractuels%20Etudes%20japonaises%20rentr%C3%A9e%202024.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> For further reference, see the French government regulation concerning 'répétiteur', 'lecteur' and 'maître de langue' in Decree no. 87-754 of 14 September 1987 and Decree no. 87-755 of 14 September 1987. Retrieved from <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000501402/2024-06-08/> & <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000867627/2024-06-08/>.

teach.<sup>7</sup> At INALCO, there are 6 professionals between ‘répétiteur’, ‘lecteur’ and ‘maître de langue’ teaching the Japanese Language; at Ca’ Foscari, there are 12.

Within the UK context, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), London, has the largest faculty staff in Japanese area studies with a total of 16 scholars,<sup>8</sup> a largest number when compared to, for instance, Oxford<sup>9</sup> and Cambridge,<sup>10</sup> which employ 12 and 8 scholars respectively.

As for France, INALCO (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales), Paris, stands out with a large faculty staff comprising 49 scholars,<sup>11</sup> in comparison, for instance, to other public French Universities such as Université Paris Cité, with 42 scholars,<sup>12</sup> and Université Bordeaux Montaigne, with 11 scholars.<sup>13</sup>

Ca’ Foscari, for instance, comprises a total of 24 scholars researching and teaching Japanese area studies ranging from literature, theatre, classical Japanese language, Japanese sociolinguistics, sociology, business Japanese and the Ainu language.<sup>14</sup>

After confirming that SOAS and INALCO hold the larger faculty staff in both the UK and France, they have been thus selected for comparison with Ca’ Foscari University. Furthermore, both Institutions claim to be the major centres for Japanese area studies in Europe.<sup>15</sup> It is

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<sup>7</sup> “Native speakers are foreigners or Italian citizens who, due to their family or linguistic background, have the ability to express themselves naturally in their mother tongue.” Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia. *Reclutamento dei Collaboratori ed Esperti Linguistici*. Retrieved from: <https://www.unive.it/pag/8288>

<sup>8</sup> SOAS University. *Academic Staff at the Japan and Korea Section*. Retrieved from <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/schools-departments-and-sections/departments-east-asian-languages-and-cultures/japan-and-0>

<sup>9</sup> University of Oxford. *Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. People*. Retrieved from <https://www.ames.ox.ac.uk/article/our-staff?filter-986-subject%20group-682491=5821&page-682491=0>

<sup>10</sup> University of Cambridge. *Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. People*. Retrieved from <https://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/people>

<sup>11</sup> Inalco. *Licences LLCER - Brochures. Etudes Japonaises; JAPONAIS - Licence LLCER 2023-2024*. Retrieved from <https://www.inalco.fr/licences-llcer-brochures>

<sup>12</sup> Université Paris Cité. *Langues et Civilisations de l’Asie Orientale. Équipes pédagogiques; études japonaises*. Retrieved from <https://u-paris.fr/lcao/equipe-pedagogique/>

<sup>13</sup> Université Bordeaux Montaigne. *UFR Langues et Civilisations. Département des Etudes Japonaises*. Retrieved from [https://extranet.u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr/annuaire/detailComposante.php?no\\_serv=377](https://extranet.u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr/annuaire/detailComposante.php?no_serv=377)

<sup>14</sup> Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia. *Dipartimento di Studi sull’Asia e sull’Africa mediterranea*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/data/struttura/520070>

<sup>15</sup> “SOAS is home to the largest collection of Japan specialists outside of Japan, and the largest concentration of Korean specialists in Europe.” SOAS University. *Japan and Korea Section*. Retrieved

important to consider that SOAS is an extra-ue institution, and as such it pertains to a different context from Ca' Foscari and INALCO. However, focusing on the comparison of the number of scholars and hours dedicated to Japanese area studies and Japanese language, I believe this comparison is feasible to better understand Ca' Foscari University's position within the European framework.

When observing each institution's number of credits corresponding to the Japanese language, while INALCO and Italy adopt the ECTS system,<sup>16</sup> equating 1 ECTS with approximately 25/30 hours of studying, SOAS accreditation system equals 1 credit with 10 hours of studying.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the SOAS programme is outlined in four years against the three years of the BA programmes of Ca' Foscari University and INALCO, with a total of 480 UK credits (thus equating to 4800 hours of study) and of these, 135 credits (1350 hours) are dedicated to the Japanese Language. The programme's third year is also necessarily spent in Japan.<sup>18</sup>

INALCO offers a total of 87 ECTS (2175 hours) of Japanese Language divided into three years over a total of 180 ECTS (4500 hours), offering a more paced Japanese language pathway, and the additional opportunity to take on Classical Japanese classes.<sup>19</sup> INALCO, too, allows students to spend one or two semesters abroad through the ERASMUS+ programme or a variety of both inside institutional and governmental scholarships.

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from <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/schools-and-departments/department-east-asian-languages-and-cultures/japan-and-korea-section>

"In terms of the number of students and teaching staff, INALCO's Japanese training program is the largest not only in France, but also in Europe. The flow of its graduates is greater than that of SOAS in London, the other major center for Japanology." Inalco. *Japonais*. Retrieved from <https://www.inalco.fr/langues/japonais>

<sup>16</sup> The European Union's Official Website. *ECTS users' guide 2015*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

<sup>17</sup> "As a rough guide, 1 credit equals approximately 10 hours of work. Most of this will be independent study. It will also include class time, which may include lectures, seminars and other classes. Some subjects, such as learning a language, have more class time than others." SOAS University. Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures & Japan and Korea Section. BA Japanese. Retrieved from <https://www.soas.ac.uk/study/find-course/ba-japanese>

<sup>18</sup> SOAS University. *Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures...*

<sup>19</sup> Inalco. *Japonais. Licence LLCER, Asie de l'Est, Japonais et Diplômes d'établissement Japonais*. Retrieved from [https://www.inalco.fr/sites/default/files/asset/document/formation\\_japonais\\_licence\\_llcer\\_de\\_2023-2024.pdf](https://www.inalco.fr/sites/default/files/asset/document/formation_japonais_licence_llcer_de_2023-2024.pdf)



Ca' Foscari provides a total of 60 ECTS (1500 hours) distributed between three years (18 in the first year, 18 in the second year, and 24 in the third year), with an additional six or twelve credits with optional classes (as Classical Japanese language or Commercial Negotiation, a Business Japanese class)<sup>20</sup> over a total of 180 ECTS. Ca' Foscari University also offers the possibility to spend an exchange semester or a year in Japan, both through a partially funded<sup>21</sup> and a non-funded<sup>22</sup> programme.

Table 1 Percentage and Total Hours for the Japanese Language, Faculty and Non-Faculty Staff at SOAS, Inalco and Ca' Foscari.

Institution	Percentage of Japanese Language Hours Over Total Hours	Total Hours of Japanese Language Learning in Each School	Faculty Staff Members	Non-Faculty Staff Members Teaching Japanese Language
SOAS	28,12%	1350 hours	16	N/D
INALCO	48,33%	2175 hours	49	6
Ca' Foscari University of Venice	33,33%	1500 hours	24	12

When discussing specific trends in Italy, the survey's report highlights that the majority of Japanese language learners in Italy are affiliated with Higher Education (78%), with most majoring in Japanese, although 40% of the total learners are studying Japanese as a world language, indicating that the Japanese language is not a core subject in their studies.<sup>23</sup>

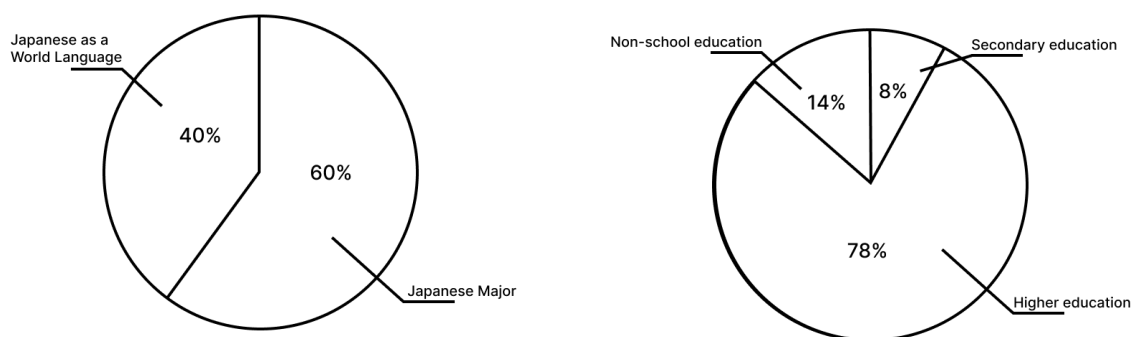
<sup>20</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Piano di studio. Giappone [LT40-23-23]*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/data/it/1436/giappone-lt40-23-23>

<sup>21</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia (last update 28/05/2024). *Overseas mobility - outgoing students*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/pag/12633/>

<sup>22</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *The Department of Asian and North African Studies. Mobilità Internazionale [International Mobility]*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/pag/43271/>

<sup>23</sup> The Japan Foundation, *Survey report...*

Figure 2 Percentage of Students of the Japanese Language in Italy; within Higher Education, Percentage of Students Majoring in Japanese or Studying Japanese as a World Language. (The Japan Foundation. Survey report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021).



The database indicates that six universities offer Bachelor's Programmes with a Major in Japanese, and three more offer Japanese as a world language. Other Institutions offering Majors in Japanese like Ca' Foscari University are the University of Bologna, the University of Florence, the University of Naples "L'Orientale", Sapienza University of Rome, and the University of Turin. All of these universities classify their Japanese language courses under L-11, a designation used to indicate teaching programmes related to Modern Languages and Literature. The weight expressed in ECTS assigned to the Japanese Language is respectively as the table shows:

Table 2 Number and percentage of Credits in the Japanese language per university offering Bachelor's Programmes Majoring in Japanese under L-11 in Italy.

Institution	Ca' Foscari University of Venice	University of Bologna	University of Florence	The University of Naples "L'Orientale"	Sapienza University of Rome	The University of Turin
ECTS	60 CFU	2 Programmes of 27 ECTS	30 ECTS	2 Programmes of 16 and 24 ECTS	36 ECTS	2 Programmes of 26 ECTS
Percentage of ECTS in Japanese Courses Over Total	33.33%	15.00%	16.67%	8.89%; 13.33%	20.00%	14.44%

It can be concluded that, in comparison with the aforementioned universities, Ca' Foscari stands out as the Bachelor's programme offering the highest number of ECTS (60). This is

because Ca' Foscari's Bachelor's programme allocates a smaller number of credits to a second world language (12), whereas Bologna and Napoli, for instance, keep a balanced ratio of credits between a choice of two languages, eventually offering the possibility to study one European language and add Japanese as a world language, or studying two world languages. Keeping this into account, I will briefly introduce Japanese Language Education at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, contextualising the case study.

### 1.3.1 Japanese Language Education at Ca' Foscari

Alongside a Bachelor's programme, Ca' Foscari University of Venice offers two Master's programmes majoring in Japanese and a Doctoral programme, all administered by the Department of Asian and North African Studies. In 2017<sup>24</sup> and 2022<sup>25</sup>, the Department has been recognized as a 'Department of Excellence' by the Italian ex-Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), now Ministry of Instruction and Merit (MIM), because of its national and international recognition, being one of the top 100 universities in the world for Modern Languages according to the QS World University Ranking by subject.<sup>26</sup> For the past three years, Ca' Foscari has consistently ranked as one of the top universities for this discipline, placing 59th in 2021, 61st in 2022, and 66th in 2023, among the top three in Italy. The Japanese language in Venice dates back to 1873 when the High School of Commerce of Venice (precursor of Ca' Foscari University of Venice) first held Japanese language classes (Caroli, 2018).

Japanese language education at Ca' Foscari comprises a total of 984 students in 2024, divided between the aforementioned Bachelor's programme and two Master's, but also

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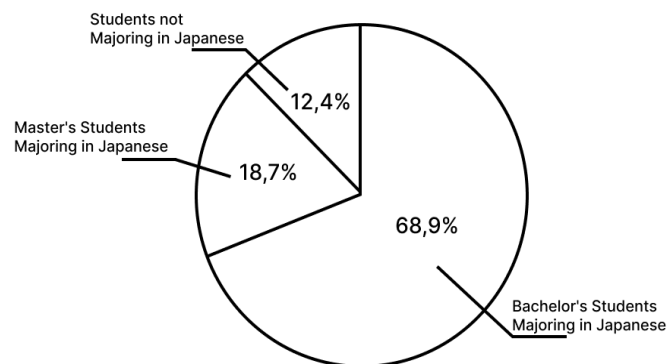
<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Instruction and Merit (MIM) identifies and funds the best 180 departments among Italian state universities every five years. Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito. Dipartimenti di Eccellenza 2018-2022, Retrieved from <https://www.miur.gov.it/dipartimenti-di-eccellenza>

<sup>25</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia (last update 27/01/2023). *4 Ca' Foscari Departments selected as 'Departments of Excellence'*. Retrieved from [https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx\\_news\\_pi1%5Bnews%5D=13533](https://www.unive.it/pag/14024/?tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=13533)

<sup>26</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia (last update 27/02/2024). *The Department of Asian and North African Studies. Department of Excellence - why are we 'excellent'?* Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/pag/48043/>.

considering students not majoring in Japanese and studying it as a world language. The majority of students, around 678, are enrolled in the Bachelor's programme and represent 68.9% of the total.

Figure 3 Percentage of Students at Ca' Foscari University Majoring in Japanese in the Bachelor's Degree, Majoring in Japanese in the Master's Degree, and Not Majoring in Japanese and Studying Japanese as a World Language.

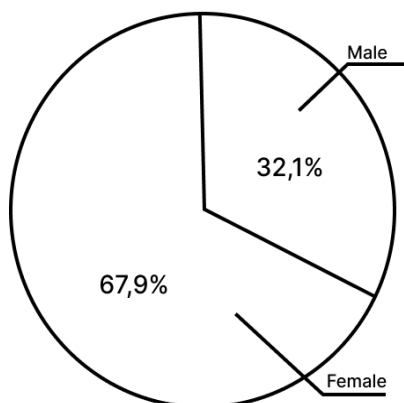


As the focus of this dissertation, I will outline the structure of the Bachelor's first year. The programme in "Language, Culture and Society of Asia and Mediterranean Africa", where Japanese can be selected as the core subject, due to the high number of students applying every year (in 2022, 906 applications) has employed a standardised test that determines the candidate's position in a ranking among 250 available places.<sup>27</sup> According to data collected in 2024, the programme presents a majority of female students, 585, with male students numbering 277, 67.9% and 32.1% respectively.

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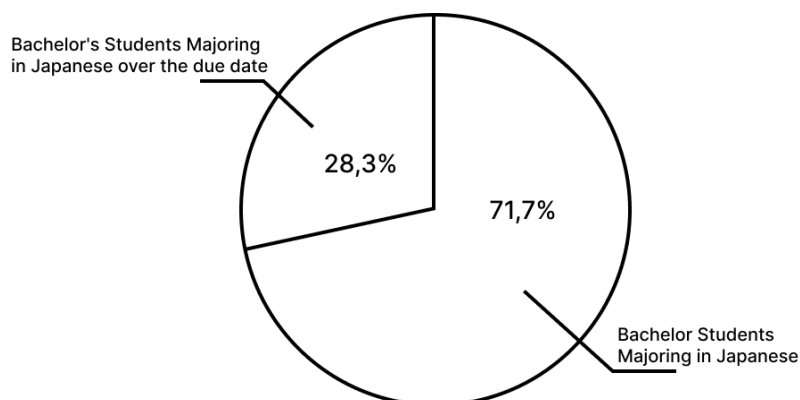
<sup>27</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Bachelor's Degree Programme in Language, Culture and Society of Asian and Mediterranean Africa. Admission*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/web/en/5086/admission>.

Figure 4 Percentage of Female and Male Students in the Bachelor's Degree in "Language, Culture and Society of Asia and Mediterranean Africa" Majoring in Japanese at Ca' Foscari University.



The number of Bachelor's students enrolled in the academic year 2023/2024 has been 678 students for all the three years of the Bachelor's programme, also considering students who are taking longer to graduate, that sums up to 267. This number is important because students who have not completed their Bachelor's programme and are still enrolled are probably still attending classes, concurring to the high number of students in the classroom.

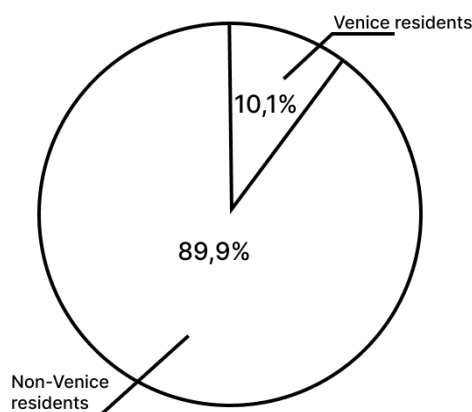
Figure 5 Percentage of Students in the Bachelor's Degree in "Language, Culture and Society of Asia and Mediterranean Africa" Majoring in Japanese at Ca' Foscari University, Divided Between Students Regularly Attending Classes and Students Taking Longer to Graduate.



Moreover, it should be noted that the majority of students (89.9%) enrolled in the same academic year are resident outside the province of Venice. Ca' Foscari University classifies

“off-campus” students as those living over 80km from the programme’s main site,<sup>28</sup> with many needing to rent apartments or dormitories in the city or nearby. In the last few years, following the COVID-19 Pandemic, the cost of living has significantly increased, and rental fees in Venice are extremely high when compared to the national average.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 6 Percentage of Students in the Bachelor’s Degree in “Language, Culture and Society of Asia and Mediterranean Africa” Majoring in Japanese at Ca’ Foscari University Divided Between Residents in the Province of Venice and Non-Residents in the Province of Venice.



Students during the first year of their Bachelor’s programme need to earn 18 CFU (equivalent to ECTS) in Japanese Language: as each credit equals 25 hours of study, the total would be 450 hours. Some of these hours are comprehended in lesson time, however attendance is not mandatory. The rest are for the student to use for independent study. Looking at other subjects planned for the first year of the bachelor’s Programme, both from area studies and other compulsory subjects (6 ECTS of English/French Language, 6 ECTS of Italian literature), they sum up to a total of 42 ECTS. If we add the 42 ECTS of cultural subjects with the 18 ECTS of the Japanese language, we obtain the 60 credits planned for the first year of the Bachelor’s programme, excluding facultative subjects which are freely selected by the

<sup>28</sup> Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia. *Borse per il diritto allo studio*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/pag/34917/>

<sup>29</sup> Il Sole 24 Ore, *Qualità della vita a Venezia*. Retrieved from <https://lab24.ilsole24ore.com/qualita-della-vita/venezia>

student.<sup>30</sup> Between this, the Japanese language alone represents approximately 30% of the total.

Table 3 An Overview of the ECTS and Respective Percentage Required for the First Year of the Bachelor's Degree Programme in "Language Culture and Society of Asia and Mediterranean Africa", Japan curriculum, at Ca' Foscari University.

<b>Courses Planned for the First Year of the Bachelor's in Japanese Studies</b>	<b>ECTS</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Italian Literature English/French Language History of Japan I Japanese Literature I History of Japanese Philosophy and Religion I History of Japanese Art I	42	70%
Japanese Language I	18	30%

Japanese classes usually comprise lectures where a professor explains grammar content in Italian, and classes called 'practices' where language teachers (usually referred to as Foreign Language Experts) make them exercise over these contents in Japanese and also add grammar points and vocabulary. In Italian "Collaboratori ed Esperti Linguistici" or "CEL", Foreign Language Experts are Japanese native speakers who are employed by the University by a public call. As already stated earlier, they are not technically considered faculty staff, and they are on the same level as the technical and administrative staff. For the Japanese language there are 12 CEL, all women.<sup>31</sup> These experts usually manage large classes, typically around 70 people per class.

This could explain the adoption of a pedagogical approach that seems to reflect a structural orientation to language teaching, born in the United States during the '60s (Balboni, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Piano di studio. Giappone [LT40-23-23]*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/data/it/1440/giappone-lt40-23-24>

<sup>31</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa mediterranea. Strutture*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/data/strutture/520070>

This approach, according to the author, elicits a “spontaneous memorization” over “conscious reflection” (p. 29), and is mainly based on frontal explanation of grammatical contents, pattern drills (a series of quick interactions following a stimuli-answer-confirm pattern), and role-playing. The reason for the use of this particular approach or exercises inspired by this line of thought, according to Balboni (2015), is the automatisisation through repetition of certain linguistic processes so that repeating many times what has just been discovered or heard by the teacher can prepare the learner to act in future contexts (pp. 29-30). Classes rely on a textbook (Shin Bunka Shokyū Nihongo, 2007) which does not come with explicit instructions nor exercises (which are integrated by the CEL) and little grammatical explanations, or prompts for self-evaluation and self-reflection, key elements in a view of autonomy from a technical point of view (Reinders, 2011).

What can be noticed from this brief presentation is that there is little to no space for student autonomy in these kinds of practices, since they heavily rely on direct explanations and exercises employed by the teacher. In this case, the teacher, a native speaker, is considered by the students a source of correct and natural language instruction, a position of power and authority specific to this context. Questioning what ‘correct’ Japanese is a point which has already been addressed elsewhere (Thomson, 2010; Hosokawa, 2008, 2012; Mariotti, 2020b), and it will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

### 1.3.2 Tutoring and Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring can be classified in a variety of ways, depending on what factors are taken into account. For instance, Falchikov (2001) offers a distinction based on the status of the participants to tutoring, the context where it is carried out, and the roles that are assumed by the involved subjects. Moreover, Topping (1998) classifies peer tutoring within ten dimensions, ranging from contents, place, time, objectives, etc. (Torre, 2006).

In Italy, peer tutoring practices in Higher Education were officially introduced and institutionalised with the enactment of law 341 in 1990. The main objectives comprehended



orientation practices and assistance in order to prevent dropouts and delays in graduation. Aligned with what will be the contents of the Declaration of Bologna (1999) and European policies regarding Higher Education, this law emphasised the centrality of students and the responsibility for Institutions to meet their needs. Further regulation was provided in 1995 by the Conference of Italian Universities Rectors (CRUI), offering additional details on how single Institutions could regulate their tutoring activities. What emerges is the need to assist the student throughout its academic career, from admission processes to placement activities. (Torre, 2006; Da Re, 2012). At first, tutoring activities in Italy followed the pastoral care model originating from British and North American academia, where a faculty member tutors small groups or individual students. Later, as introduced by law 170 of the 1st of July 2003, the activities were delegated to “able and worthy” students (Torre, 2006).

Ca' Foscari University has also introduced peer tutoring practices in accordance with the aforementioned regulations, and since 2011 tutoring practices are provided by departments, interdepartmental schools, or specific areas dedicated to didactics and student services. The University defines peer tutoring as “carried out by a senior student that provides support concerning the university experience to peers or students at a lower level of study”. Ca' Foscari University distinguishes between two categories of peer tutoring activities: informative tutoring and specialist tutoring. Specialist tutoring comprises educational-integrative activities, support for technical decisions, and assistance for international students. The former kind of activity consists of classes, workshops, seminars and labs that complement curricular activities. According to tutoring regulations, “tutoring activities are based on a careful analysis and definition of students’ interests and dispositions”, with particular attention to learning difficulties.<sup>32</sup>

Alongside classes, the Department offers peer tutoring services employing graduate and doctoral students to support both graduate and undergraduate students. Students respond to

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<sup>32</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Regolamento servizio di tutorato*. Retrieved from [https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ateneo/norme\\_regolamenti/regolamenti/studenti/All. R eg. Tutorato modif 2021.pdf](https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/ateneo/norme_regolamenti/regolamenti/studenti/All. R eg. Tutorato modif 2021.pdf)

a public call for tutors and are selected through a competitive examination that evaluates their academic career, including the number of credits earned, GPA, final mark on the Bachelor's degree, or final mark on the Master's degree for doctoral students. Students are also selected based on relevant experience related to the subject they intend to tutor, considering previous tutoring experience, possession of linguistic certifications, study abroad experiences, or specific teaching qualifications. Each of these criteria assigns a score to the student, who is then ranked accordingly.<sup>33</sup>

Ca' Foscari University is therefore aligned with national regulations concerning tutoring services, providing assistance to students who experience specific difficulties in order to avoid drop-outs and delays in graduation, encompassing the broader meaning of promoting "student success". Student success can be intended as encompassing an academic meaning, considering equally also engagement in educationally effective activities, satisfaction, acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies (Kuh, 2011). This term needs to be approached with care, as its academic definition has been previously related to majority groups exercising soft power over minority groups, defining what is successful and what is not (Weatherton&Schussler, 2021). Engagement has been seen as relevant to student success in higher education and can be achieved through the construction of meaningful "learning communities" (Wyatt, 2011) where students participate actively in their learning process and activities.

Concerning the specific focus of this dissertation, the programme in Language, Culture and Society of Asia and Mediterranean Africa reports highly positive graduation rates, with 69,7 % in 2020, 66,3% in 2021, and 71.1% in 2022. These rates highly exceed the national average for other L-11 programmes, respectively 48.7%, 51.5%, and 52.6% for the same years.

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<sup>33</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa mediterranea. Bandi di tutorato*. Retrieved from [https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user\\_upload/dipartimenti/DSAAM/documenti/lavora-con-noi/tutorato/2023-2024/Bando\\_n\\_882\\_II\\_sem\\_23-24\\_per\\_web.pdf](https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSAAM/documenti/lavora-con-noi/tutorato/2023-2024/Bando_n_882_II_sem_23-24_per_web.pdf)

After the COVID-19 Pandemic, the tutoring service has been offered both online and in the classroom. As attendance is non-mandatory, this dual version probably reaches a diverse pool of students from different situations, as, for example, students living far away from university who prefer online classes, or on the other hand students who do not have proper appliances or a quiet space to concentrate at home and thus prefer attending tutoring sessions in person. Tutors are employed to provide 30 hours of work that can be distributed throughout the semester. Taking into account the aforementioned 90 hours of independent study, some of them can be considered in the attendance of tutoring sessions.

In short, students are expected to spend a considerable part of the 450 hours required to complete the first year of Japanese language studying by themselves. Therefore, the significance of autonomy in this particular context can be interpreted as a practical and technical competence needed to successfully complete assigned classwork. This essentially aligns with the broader vision of the significance of peer tutoring activities in Higher Education. What still needs to be explored, however, is the significance of peer tutoring practices in stimulating critical reflection on broader topics even not strictly related to university study, and its assistance in enhancing collaboration and cohesion. Ca' Foscari University of Venice offers a framework for activities that share these aims, and that will be presented in the next paragraph.

## 1.4 Critical & Transformative Japanese Language Education at Ca' Foscari

Japanese Language teaching at Ca' Foscari has seen the activities of the No-Level Brick<sup>34</sup> research group, officially founded and led by Marcella Mariotti in 2019 with funding from Ca'

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<sup>34</sup> The Project name is inspired by Pink Floyd's iconic song "Another Brick in the Wall" from 1979. This choice reflects the participatory and questioning nature of the approach, and expresses its underlying research question: "How to empower FL teachers and students *not* to become *another brick in the walls?*" (Mariotti, 2020b).

Foscari University.<sup>35</sup> However, the framework's initial development dates back to 2011 (Mariotti, 2020b). The group is named after the approach that has been designed and brought forward by the founder, and advocates for the role of critical thinking and citizenship formation within Foreign Language Education, aiming at active citizenship and social cohesion (Mariotti, 2020c). Since its foundation, it has carried out a number of activities, such as weekly seminars, discussions, and numerous projects related to Japanese language education. All of these activities will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Drawing from thinkers like Gramsci (1932) and his concept of hegemony and Freire's (1970) transformative vision of pedagogical practice, the purpose of this approach relies in questioning discriminatory practices in language teaching and learning derived from native-speakerism and linguicism (Mariotti, 2020c), along with a dialogical active approach derived from Hideo Hosokawa's (2017; 2019) research framework developed at Waseda University since the 90's. The No-Level Brick research works towards the implementation of transformative educational pedagogies as participatory and active practices aimed at democratic citizenship formation (Mariotti, 2017), entailing a "shifting of focus from a vertical language proficiency labelling dividing wall, to a horizontal cohesion of teachers and learners as social actors" (Mariotti, 2020c).

Based on this, e-learning and AI systems are considered powerful tools for enhancing learner independence and autonomy, allowing both teachers and learners to be active participants in "creating their/our own teaching and learning landscapes" and thus allowing language education to focus on forming socially responsible individuals (Mariotti, 2017). For this very reason, the No-Level Brick research group has created online tools aimed at autonomy in language learning, de-standardizing how learners learn the language and how teachers confront the learners and themselves.

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<sup>35</sup> The Project has been granted "*Supporting Principal Investigators*" (SPIN) funds with the purpose of promoting impactful research and enhance the university international recognition. Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Progetti di ricerca: Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa mediterranea*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/pag/15773/> <https://www.unive.it/pag/31926/>

JALEA (JApanese LEArning system), active from 2016, is a web tool dedicated to higher education learners, based on a learner-centred approach and self-guided discovery of grammar structures and vocabulary. The project is the evolution of an earlier one named BunpoHyDict, based on the same principle: the use of realia (authentic language examples from everyday life) through hypermedia links and grammar dictionaries (Mantelli, 2020).

CAFOSCARI Jisho (2022) is an Italian Japanese digital dictionary, based on previous projects from the same research group such as ITADICT (Mariotti, Mantelli, 2011) and a4Edu (Mantelli, Mariotti, 2016). The project can be considered the first Italian-Japanese online dictionary, and its unique characteristic consists of the fact that it has been created with the active collaboration of Bachelor's and Master's students, providing a collaborative space for polishing students' language skills and critical thinking while using a variety of resources (search engines, apps, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, etc).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> NoLBrick - No-Level Brick Language Education. *CAFOSCARI Jisho*. Retrieved from <https://nolbrick.wordpress.com/cafoscari-jisho-2/>

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Critical Language Education

Critical pedagogy has seen ongoing theorising since the '70s. Giroux (2010, as in Dasli & Diaz, 2016) defines it as a “praxis-driven educational movement that enables students to develop a revolutionary political consciousness” (p. 15), allowing them to interrogate and challenge traditional views of education. Nowadays, the inspiration behind it is mostly associated with the seminal work of Paulo Freire, who framed it in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

Understanding Freire’s position within the historical and socio-political context is essential. Luke (2004) observes its relevance amid third-world politics, the civil rights movement, and the international student movement. Furthermore, the relevance of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be still understood by its pioneeristic and decolonising statement, written by the author during his educational experience in Brazil. What Freire has been advocating for is the importance of a ‘humanizing’ pedagogy, a problem-posing approach to education, as opposed to what he saw as ‘dehumanizing’ practices, introducing the ‘banking’ concept of education. Teaching, states Freire (1970), often implies ‘filling’ the students with contents “which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (p.44), lacking “creativity, transformation and knowledge” (p.45). What Freire advocates for in opposition is a problem-posing model, a dialogic approach that allows both learners and the teacher (now a learner among learners) to aim at developing critical thinking and reflect upon the oppressive nature of the situation they live in (Riasati, 2012). As Freire (1970) states,

Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits  
creative power, problem-posing education involves a

constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (p. 54).

However, as already mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, theorizers of a critical approach to education have not been spared criticism, especially from a feminist pedagogy perspective. Gore and Ellsworth (1992) have been addressing their simplistic and dualistic view of oppression and power, advocating for the paternalistic understanding of empowering practices related to education. As Starfield (2004) argues, they

were variously critiqued as being constructions of rationalist and paternalistic Enlightenment discourses in which powerful, radical teacher-educators (frequently male) conceived of themselves as “liberating” oppressed students through the transmission of power - conceived of as a property - to their up-until-then disempowered students. (p. 140)

Critiques also addressed the lack of a focus on practice and underlined the importance of properly addressing the specific contexts of oppression (Gore, 1992).

This dissertation is inspired by Freirean critical pedagogy, whilst also considering the aforementioned critiques. Within this framework, this dissertation aims to further elaborate on a critical approach to language learning drawing from Freire’s radical position as well as adopting a more complex and capillary vision of power and power relations, such as Foucault’s (Hall, 1997).

However, as this dissertation addresses critical pedagogy within the Language Education and Applied Linguistics field, it is important to note that Freirean critical pedagogy has

influenced the field as a critical theory shaped by both Marxist (Kubota&Miller, 2017) and Hegelian thought in a world before the semiotic turn and post-structuralism (Luke, 2004). A proper seminal introduction to the importance of a critical stance in Applied Linguistics has been initially addressed by Pennycook (1999), which translated into the field of Critical Applied Linguistics, stressing the importance of a politically emancipatory stance in language education (Dasli & Diaz, 2016). Pennycook, according to Kubota&Lin (2009), has advocated for a language education field which could go beyond finding the best methodology of teaching languages, problematizing the use of English within internationalisation and power relations.

Within the language education field, a critical approach has initially involved L2 learning environments, as learners belonging to such contexts were usually minority immigrants in relation to a hegemonic majority language such as English or other Euro-American languages. Facing the risk of marginalisation, but also hardships living in a new country, they were experiencing what Riasati&Mollaei (2012) calls “damaged identities” (p. 225). This led to the motivation of educators to introduce critical approaches inside the classroom, also finding that the objective of learning is “to understand why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way” (p. 225).

Regarding FL, as the learning context is different, FL learners may not face the same marginalisation as L2 learners. Riasati&Mollaei (2012) states that a critical approach to FL education, as learners are probably living in a country where they are not a minority, may have different objectives from L2 critical language education. For instance, for learners belonging to elite majorities, it may be a chance to increase their “sensitivity to diversity, to different types of oppression” (Riasati&Mollaei, p. 226). However, the author does not elaborate this point of view from an intersectionality perspective, as learners might as well belong to the community they live for but be however marginalised for their gender, sexuality, age, etc.

Crookes (2016) relates language teaching to three major educational perspectives, namely a traditional form, a progressive form, and a transformative form. The scholar exemplifies how traditional educational approaches can be understood as mainstream and dominant, deriving from an instrumental and ‘essentialist’ view of education. Its objective is to form “good



upstanding individuals” (p. 5) who are able to integrate into the nation-state and its needs, which in capitalist countries overlap with the interests of the commercial sector. On the other hand, Crookes defines ‘progressive’ a student-centred orientation, whose main purpose is to allow for the development of the individual from a civic and democratic perspective. This political attempt, states the scholar, was extinguished with World War 2, and eventually merged into the field of Applied Linguistics and humanistic approaches to language teaching in the 20th century. This approach was stimulated by the flow of migrants into English-speaking countries, leading to a proper transformative intent of changing society and the status quo within a ‘transformative’ approach to language teaching. The main difference between the progressive and transformative approaches according to Crookes (2016) lies in the fact that the transformative approach acknowledges society as a site of conflict that needs a radical transformation. From a pedagogical perspective, this translates into a curriculum that directly reflects the students’ needs as an individual from an intersectional perspective of class, gender and race. The class content is thus co-constructed with the teacher through dialogue, which facilitates the educational process but also actively challenges students about their vision of the world.

Hence, this transformative approach can be interpreted as both a chronological result of the prior essentialist and progressive approach, but also as a perspective with broader aims. Acknowledging the social tissue learners and teachers live in, a transformative approach engages both in changing society through dialogue and taking action in order to redistribute power. This vision of education is central to this dissertation.

Regarding Japanese Language Education, Crookes (2010) has noticed how it has been one of the most active fields within FL. There is still ongoing research in this particular area, as demonstrated by recent publications such as Mariotti, Ichishima, and Hosokawa (2022), but also Sato, Kamiyoshi, Okuno, and Miwa (2023).

In the following paragraph, I will introduce two research approaches that have direct connections to Japanese Language Education at Ca’ Foscari and are relevant to the present analysis.

### 2.1.1. Critical Pedagogy in Japanese Language Education: “Japanese for Thinking” and the NoLBrick Approach

The No-Level Brick Language Education approach is informed by a transformative-critical approach to language learning, based on the assumption that language education practices should aim at social cohesion and citizenship formation. Levels and competencies are challenged in order “to open new horizons for a de-standardising of teaching, learning and evaluation” (Mariotti, 2020c, p. 259).

Dialogue is a central element of this approach and derives from the dialogic approach to language teaching developed by Hosokawa at Waseda University, where Mariotti experienced it in the first person. This experience turned out to be a turning point in the development of the NoLBrick approach: as a matter of fact, the scholar reports realising at that time the importance of fostering critical literacy in FLE and going beyond native speakerism and levels as potentially oppressive standards (Mariotti, 2020c)

Languages, states Hosokawa (2017), constitute a verbal activity that enables us to interact and dialogue with others and society, making ourselves social actors in a variety of contexts, thus showing a strong connection between citizenship formation and language education. In the same text, Hosokawa expresses the need to go beyond a direct approach to language learning, which focuses on the form instead of the content and does not end in a conversation that is meaningful and important to the learner. The role of the teacher is to create a place that allows for such dialogue, which does not happen to learn a language but is created by the speaker's need to convey his opinion to others and understand what the other is saying (Hosokawa, 2017).

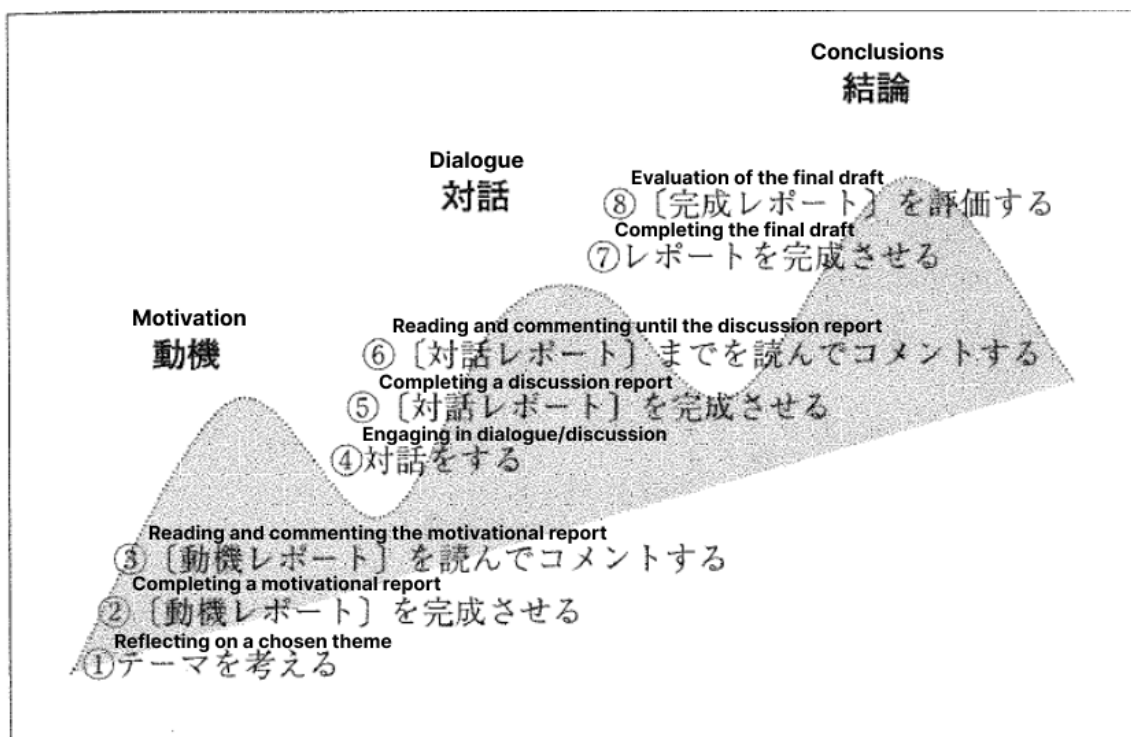
Moreover, this approach strives to go beyond formal correction. The focal point of every conversation is on the content, which is the students' thoughts and opinions, leaving aside any corrective feedback about grammar or vocabulary (Hosokawa, 2012). Positing that there is no “correct Japanese” (Hosokawa, 2008), teachers, especially native Japanese speakers, should refrain from correcting and engage in asking questions to allow for dialogue, respecting the

learner's individuality as well as their own language usage (Mariotti, 2020a). This dialogue also impacts the linguistic production of the learners, as they strive to communicate with others. In doing so, they search for the linguistic content that best conveys what they wish to say.

The educational approach behind this is called 'Japanese for thinking' (考えるための日本語, *kangaeru tame no nihongo*) or 'Japanese language education through global activities' (総合活動型日本語教育, *sōgo katsudō gata nihongo kyōiku*). Alessandrini (2020), along with the absence of grammatical correction, states that two other main characteristics need to be kept in mind about this approach. Firstly, it is learner-centred, as the learners and their thoughts are at the very core and constitute the content of the language classroom. Second, it is a problem-finding-solving activity, because learners challenge their own opinions by confronting them with others, allowing for dialogue.

The approach is thoroughly explained in many manuals created for teachers (Hosokawa, 2002; 2007; 2008; 2012; 2019). The contents are a guideline for educators interested in applying a dialogic approach to their classrooms and show the workflow of the activities. However, it is underlined how every situation is different from the other. Within this approach, every classroom activity starts with the student's interest and motivation. Enabling the students to speak about something close to their hearts is supposed to motivate them to communicate with others. This motivation (動機, *dōki*) allows them to write a report and then discuss through dialogue (対話, *taiwa*) their theme with group members, and rewrite that same report following new ideas and the comments they received. Eventually, this dialogic process leads to a new awareness and understanding of the importance of an active role in society, expressed in a completed report which contains the writer's conclusions (結論, *ketsuron*).

Figure 7 Workflow of A Dialogic Class Applying the Sōgo Katsudō Gata Nihongo Kyōiku Framework (Hosokawa, 2008) [The English translation is mine] .



Mariotti started applying a dialogic approach to Japanese Language classes at Ca' Foscari University of Venice initially from 2011. In order to show the importance of leaving behind oppressive level systems, one of the first attempts was directed at absolute beginners with no prior knowledge of the Japanese language (Mariotti, 2020c).

This translated into the project “Action Research Zero” (ARZ), held in 2016, which eventually led to several other projects applied to Japanese language classes based on the same research framework (Mariotti, 2020a; Mariotti, Ichishima, Hosokawa, 2022); for instance, in Mariotti (2020c), the author presents, in addition to the ARZ case study, two case studies pertaining to both Bachelor’s and Master’s classes.

These practices, together with Mariotti’s experience as Chair of the Association of Japanese Teachers from 2014, allowed to elaborate the NoLBrick research framework within the newest theoretical trends within the field, eventually leading to the official formation of the

NoLBrick research group in 2019 granted University fundings.<sup>37</sup> This led to the creation of language education seminars, and the start of the Language Education (Japan) classes in 2020.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, for instance, the NoLBrick research group organised two virtual exchanges between Japanese language learners and Japanese students. Both projects were led and ideated by Mariotti and funded by the Japan Foundation.

The first one was named “Virtual “ryuugaku” [exchange] for real interactions and job-hunting: supporting Covid online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills”, and it was conducted from December 2020 until March 2021. Varone (2021) provides an overview of the project and elaborates on participants’ responsibility and critical awareness. The project second edition was conducted from September until November 2021, under the title “Virtual “ryuugaku” for real interactions and job-hunting: supporting Covid online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills 2: Empowerment through SDGS”. Both projects revolved around online chat platforms and aimed at facilitating connection and dialogue about the Sustainable Development Goals between learners during the pandemic.

Lastly, the NoLBrick approach has also been applied during two projects to High School students with zero or little prior knowledge of the Japanese language. These projects, too, were coordinated by Mariotti and funded by Ca’ Foscari University. One of the projects, titled “PCTO<sup>38</sup> Experiential Workshop: Japanese Without Limits!” held from October 2022 until January in Venice, involved small groups of students and led to the writing of a short essay about each student’s interest.<sup>39</sup> The other one, named “Authentic Japanese: Working in the

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<sup>37</sup> Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia. *Progetti di ricerca: Dipartimento di Studi sull’Asia e sull’Africa mediterranea*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/pag/15773/> <https://www.unive.it/pag/31926/>

<sup>38</sup> In the Italian High School system, PCTO are “transversal skills and orientation pathways”, or curricular activities designed to allow students some practical experience in order to help them with their future career or studies.

<sup>39</sup>NoLBrick - No-Level Brick Language Education. *PCTO Workshop esperienziale: Giapponese senza freni!* Retrieved from <https://nolbrick.wordpress.com/pcto-workshop-esperienziale-giapponese-senza-freni/>

Language Through Social Media”<sup>40</sup> involved a small group of students who engaged in producing posts and stories for an Instagram page.

While the peer tutoring sessions analysed in this dissertation did not employ these two approaches, as the content was pre-established due to institutional requirements, the activities were designed to promote dialogue between peers and between tutees and tutor. Moreover, non-corrective feedback was employed during the activities, which privileged questions and discussion.

Table 4 A Chronological Overview of the Projects conducted at Ca’ Foscari University employing a dialogic approach.

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Month - Year</b>
Action Research Zero (ARZ)	September - December 2016
Bachelor’s degree 3rd Year	September - December 2018
Master’s degree 2nd Year	September - December 2019
Japan Foundation Virtual Business	December 2020 - March 2021
Collaborative Creativity for Japanese Language Education: a Multidimensional Online Project in Response to COVID-19	December 2020 - March 2021
Virtual "Ryuugaku" for Real Interactions and Job-Hunting: Supporting COVID Online Teaching of Japanese Language Oral and Written Production Skills 2: Empowerment Through SDGS	September - November 2021
(PCTO) Authentic Japanese: Working in the Language through Social Media	November 2022 - January 2023
PCTO Experiential Workshop: Japanese Without Limits!	October 2022 - February 2023
Creative Writing Workshop x NoLBrick	February 2023 - March 2023

<sup>40</sup> Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, *Attività PCTO: alternanza scuola- lavoro*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/data/46282/?id=26442600>

## 2.1.2 The Maieutic Facilitator

Both Hosokawa and Mariotti have at various times employed peers and other teachers as facilitators in group activities, making it necessary to briefly address the concept of facilitation and the role of the facilitator.

Benson (2013) argues that the concept of facilitation which has influenced theories of self-direction and autonomy can be traced back to the 1970s field of humanistic psychology. Rogers's (1969) notion of teaching as facilitation is particularly relevant, as it emphasises a non-judgemental approach towards the learners, encouraging curiosity, allowing mistakes, and learning through interaction with the teacher but also with peers and the social environment.

Alessandrini (2020) offers an overview of facilitation within a classroom employing a dialogic approach to language learning. 'Facilitation' has been often seen as an attribute of the teacher, considered as a "guide on the side" (Morrison, 2014, as in Alessandrini, 2020). The change of perspective involves moving from a teacher-driven to a learner-centred approach to language teaching, capable of fostering autonomy and responsibility. Following this shift, Balboni (2015) also discusses the idea of the teacher as a facilitator of the language learning process.

In the dialogic approaches described above, however, being a facilitator is not only an attribute of the teacher. Student-facilitators can be defined as "subjects engaging in [such] dialogical exchange with students" (Alessandrini, 2020, p.3), but also as a "mediator who tries to fill the gap between the frightening character of the professor and the shyness of the student" (Ligabue, 2019, as in Alessandrini, 2020). Their role essentially entails asking questions, stimulating discussion, and allowing learners to explore the target language. As Mariotti (2020a) has stated before, drawing from Dolci's (Dolci & Amico, 2012) maieutic approach, the facilitator is "an expert in the art of asking" (p. 30).

In the classroom, facilitators assist the teacher in creating an environment for dialogue and discussion. However, what Alessandrini (2020) has interestingly observed about the

relationship between peer facilitators and other learners is the reproduction of hierarchical relationships and dependency on this new figure. Students rely on facilitators for guidance and encouragement, but even formal correction, eventually leading to a misalignment between the purpose of a co-construction of meaning through dialogue and students' expectations towards language learning classrooms and the figure they encounter inside it. This is further demonstrated by Arleoni (2016) in her Master's dissertation, which analyses the ARZ workshop as a case study and investigates the student-tutor relationship. Although reporting positive interactions, the dissertation also outlines the emotional relationship between the facilitator and the students, which has been useful to mitigate stress and anxiety, but has also revealed a sense of dependency for formal correction. This implies that students perceived tutors and facilitators as more knowledgeable and required them to directly provide guidance during dialogic activities.

This dissertation, although it does not employ an explicit dialogic approach in the case study due to the language course requirements, is however inspired by the role played by facilitators within these environments. The activities related to the case study have been carried out to reflect a more balanced relationship between the tutor as a facilitator and the students, avoiding exercising hierarchical knowledge transmission within tutoring activities and allowing students to co-construct knowledge through active learning, cooperation, and dialogue. What distinguishes the present analysis, however, is the absence of a teacher figure during tutoring sessions; as Chapter 4 will outline in detail, this absence seemed to have stimulated not autonomy nor critical thinking, but a renewed sense of dependency on the tutor.



## 2.2 Autonomy, Self-direction and Empowerment in Language Learning

Autonomy in language learning is not a simple notion to define. Menegale (2014) argues that containing autonomy in a single definition is no simple task, as the field can be approached from multiple perspectives and significances, implying cognitive, metacognitive, psychological, affective, and social elements.

Entering the field of language learning through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project in 1971, Benson (2013) states that an interest in autonomy was a response to the political turmoil of Europe in the late 1960s. The project led, among many things, to the establishment of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues* (CRAPEL) in 1969, coordinated by Yven Châlon, a professor at the University of Nancy, until 1972 (Raya&Vieira, 2021). The centre advocated for a *pédagogie sauvage* ('wild pedagogy'), as Châlon stated the need for a pedagogy beyond conventions and dogmas capable of fostering "the flourishing of critical minds who question established knowledge" (Raya&Vieira, 2021, p. 2).

Holec's definition, who directed the centre from 1972 onwards, can therefore be situated within this particular context as pertaining to a progressive agenda (Raya&Vieira, 2021). Mainly addressing adult learners, "to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981) is still a relevant definition as it signifies being held responsible for the whole process of learning. Moreover, Raya&Vieira (2021) explain Holec's notion that autonomy enables the learner to "proceed from a position of dependence to one of independence" (Holec, 1981, as in Raya&Vieira, 2021, p. 3).

Soon after the widespread adoption of this definition, autonomy in language learning has been associated with individualisation or individualised instruction. Autonomy was commonly associated with 'independence', implying the opposite of 'dependence', as in depending on the teacher and learning materials, but could also be interpreted as the opposite of 'interdependence', as in learning in isolation from the teacher and others. This interpretation led to criticism, pointing out the focus on the individual and its needs within individualised self-

directed learning, disregarding collaborative and cooperative learning (Benson, 2013). The answer to these criticisms came with experimentations in classroom settings where autonomy could be developed through a shift in power relationships and control, eventually leading to state that autonomy implies interdependence (Breen, 1986; Breen&Candlin, 1980, as in Benson, 2013).

Apart from independence, several terms are commonly associated with autonomy, such as 'self-directed learning' and 'self-regulated learning'. The first term has been associated with a field of inquiry developed in the United States concerning adult education and informal education, pointing at self-direction as a "global capacity" of the learner to decide about the learning process (Menegale, 2011). Conversely, Benson (2013) points out that self-direction refers to the learning process, and autonomy is an attribute of the learner, essentially on the same line as Holec's (1981). Kumaravadivelu (2003), quoting Dickinson (1987), further affirms that self-direction concerns the learner's responsibility for deciding about their learning, but it does not necessarily implement their decision. Self-regulation, on the other hand, refers to specific theories in the field of educational psychology (Menegale, 2011), such as Zimmerman's (2000). Menegale, quoting the scholar, addresses self-regulation as a process during which learners "transform their mental capacities into academic competencies" (p. 50), arguing that a self-regulated learner does not necessarily reflect and take responsibility, a key factor in autonomous learning.

Table 5 Some Definitions of 'Self-directed learning' and 'Self-regulated learning'

Self-directed learning	Self-regulated learning
Self-direction as a “global capacity” of the learner to decide about the learning process. <b>Menegale, 2011</b>	self-regulation as a process during which learners “transform their mental capacities into academic competencies” <b>Menegale, 2011 &amp; Zimmerman, 1998</b>
Self-direction refers to the learning process, and autonomy is an attribute of the learner. <b>Benson, 2001 &amp; Holec, 1981</b>	self-regulated learner does not necessarily reflect and take responsibility, a key factor in autonomous learning. <b>Menegale, 2011</b>
self-direction concerns the learner's responsibility for deciding about their learning, but it does not necessarily implement their decision. <b>Kumaravadivelu, 2003 &amp; Dickinson, 1987</b>	

The discussion above is crucial in understanding that autonomy does not question the social context. For instance, Little (1997), looking at autonomy from a psychological point of view, argues that social interactions are essential to developing an autonomous capacity. Carefully distinguishing autonomy from independent learning is essential to discern clearly between autonomy as a transformative approach to power relations in education and knowledge transmission, and autonomy as a technical skill used in self-access and individualised learning. The risk is presenting a depoliticized view of autonomy concerning only the individual and the psychological sphere, allowing for passive reproduction of already established learning conditions (Raya&Vieira, 2021), but also shifting the sense of dependence from the teacher to, for instance, self-access tools and materials (Menegale, 2014). Moreover, Benson (2013) states that autonomy and self-directed learning were early influenced by a “shift away from consumerism and materialism towards an emphasis on the meaning and value of personal experience, quality of life, personal freedom and minority rights” (p. 22) as a counter-cultural tradition. Losing its transformative momentum, Benson states that autonomy is now mainly interpreted by educators through a technical lens that stresses the

importance of education as a means for employability. The scholar shares some questions, which are the same that the writer wishes to address when discussing autonomy:

Have economic, social and educational systems across the world really changed to such an extent that we need no longer think of autonomy in terms of a shift in the balance of power towards learners? Have the interests of students, educational systems and employers in the new capitalist economies really converged to such an extent that we no longer need to tease out pedagogies that serve the interests of students from pedagogies that produce the kind of graduates that employers are deemed to require? (...) Broader social visions of education contributing to the formation of democratic communities of self-determined individuals are also liable to be erased in favour of a much narrower vision of the harnessing of educational goals to the requirements of employers (Benson, 2013, p. 23).

The scholar concludes that promoting autonomy should allow learners to bring out their interests, shifting the focus from having them meet requirements coming from the outside. It is necessary to reflect on how requirements from bigger, structural and societal contexts influence our understanding of the worth of being autonomous and *why* it is worth being autonomous. Pennycook (1997) argues that what was once a politically engaged concept conceived for questioning the given, it is now a question of 'strategies', pertaining only to the psychological sphere. Therefore, autonomy can be approached from multiple perspectives and as stated before, this dissertation will mainly focus on its significance from a transformative point of view (Raya&Vieira, 2021).

Being independent from the teacher does not mean negating its role or existence within the educational context. Holec was the first to advocate that promoting autonomy could translate to promoting an irreplaceable role for the teacher no longer based on hierarchies and power, but on the “quality and importance of his relationship to the learner” (Holec, 1981, p. 25). Following the learner-centredness of the actual trends in language education, this means viewing the teacher as a ‘facilitator’, or a ‘guide on the side’ who does not reproduce teaching as a top-down process, but engage in dialogue, empowering learners by fostering their motivation to speak and creating a sense of community (Mariotti, 2020a).

Another important aspect of autonomy that needs to be tackled is the concept of responsibility. As Holec advocated, “taking charge” implies actively engaging in the learning process and directing all the aspects of learning, such as the learning objectives, the contents, but also the methods and the evaluation (Menegale, 2014). Freire (1970) is often cited as a key contributor to the field of autonomy in language learning, as he challenged the assumption that education should educate autonomous learners as knowledgeable and skillful individuals, and advocated the need for “critical social participation within the process of education itself”, underlying the importance of going beyond hierarchical power relations and assuming responsibility of one’s own situation (Benson, 2013, p. 32).

Empowerment, as autonomy, can be approached from a variety of perspectives. For instance, Dağgöl (2020), quoting Conger&Kanungo (1988) and Thomas&Velthouse (1990), states that empowerment is “considered as a process of boosting an internal willingness and providing a climate and tasks that enhance learners’ self-sufficiency and energy” (p. 21). Moreover, the scholar states that empowerment is strictly linked to motivation in learning, as empowered learners are motivated to approach the task in front of them and feel that they can influence their surroundings. This view of empowerment is essentially consistent with Frymier, Shulman and Houser’s definition (1995). The authors, who provided a paradigm for evaluating empowerment in educational contexts drawing from work-related contexts, also stressed the importance of an intrinsic motivation to create quality learning. The ultimate goal of

empowerment in this context is to “continuously learn how to improve performance and adapt to ubiquitous changes in the environment” (p. 5).

Summarising, these definitions assume that empowerment has a strong correlation with efficiency and self-efficacy. Thinking of empowerment in these terms, however, may risk presenting it only related to the development of the individual as an upstanding member of the community.

Moving away from this significance, it is the objective of this dissertation to look at **empowerment as a collective interest in co-constructing more just social environments**. As stressed already by Mariotti (2020a), empowerment underscores fostering the learners' motivation to dialogue, increasing their awareness and enabling them to rely on their own thoughts as a result of co-created identity. On the contrary, ‘dis-empowerment’ translates to “letting them hinge on a native teacher’s correction and acknowledgement” (p. 248). Moreover, Varone (2021) argues that empowerment can be understood as the learners’ awareness of their possibility of becoming active agents of change.

Hence, this dissertation will employ the definition of autonomy by Raya & Vieira (2021), encompassing a broader, political and social meaning. In this sense, autonomy implies developing critical thinkers that contribute to the social framework: as Kumaravadivelu (2003) states, autonomy can be interpreted as a tool to obtain empowerment, interpreted as a process of social transformation through social cohesion.

Progressing the discussion on self-access tools, the next section will further delineate the relationship between autonomous learning and online tools.

### 2.2.1 Technology, Online Tools and Autonomous Learning

Technology has been previously defined as a practical application of knowledge in a particular area, used to carry out tasks through technical processes, methods, or expertise (Ahmadi, 2018). It has been analysed and classified into informative, situating, constructive and communicative, depending on the purpose and the deployment. (Chan et al., 2002;

Lim&Tay, 2003, as in Liang, 2023). Moreover, a literature review on technology-enhanced language learning revealed that scholars also distinguish between technologies employed for individual study, classroom-based tools, mobile devices, and network-based social computing. Technologies can be used to access materials, communicate, provide feedback, and integrate formal learning. As a result of the sophistication of the tools now available, all of the above features can and do overlap, so that a rigid categorization is hard to conceive (Shadiev&Yang, 2020).

Learning technologies are often associated with the development of autonomy since its early development, as in the field of CALL (computer-assisted language learning). CALL was originally coined in the 1970s, and Benson (2013), quoting Warschauer and Healey (1998), offers an overview of its development before the Internet, distinguishing between a behaviouristic, communicative and integrative phase. The latter phase introduced the use of multimedia, hypermedia and a higher degree of interactivity, also allowing for a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic input. The turn of the century and the widespread use of the Internet shifted from purpose-designed language learning applications to the use of the Internet itself as a learning environment. These conditions led, for instance, to computer-mediated communication for language learning (CMCL).

These new conditions for autonomy and self-directed learning, states Benson (2013), progressively blurred the boundaries between informal and formal education, and early research into technology usage by language learners showed that learning was more efficient from a time perspective, and also that learners could easily retrieve learning resources when needed, and that they were able to blend learning and entertainment (Thornton & Sharples, 2005, as in Benson, 2013).

Technologies in language learning often overlap with ICTs, as in Information and Communication Technology. ICTs usually refer to the creation, storage, analysis and communication of information through electronic devices. Within education and language learning, ICTs involve the use of computer-based communication concerning classroom and e-learning activities (Asad et al., 2020).

Essentially, studies on the application of learning technologies and ICTs to language learning agree on their resourcefulness and how integrating technology-enhanced learning entails a learner-centred approach to learning, allowing students to control and take responsibility over their own learning process, thus leading to autonomous and self-directed learning (Ahmadi, 2018; Asad et al., 2020; Klimova et al., 2023; Liang, 2023; Shadiev&Yang, 2020). Digital technologies assist learners in developing autonomy so that it “empowers students to take control of their own learning and work autonomously in constructing L2 knowledge through social interaction” (Lee, 2016, p.82).

Discussing synchronous distance learning, particularly relevant to this study as it represents the same modality of the case study, Menegale (2024) elaborates on the concept of ‘distance’ quoting Moore’s (1993) transactional theory. ‘Distance’ can be understood as “a psychological and communicative space that sets apart the student and the teacher” (p.167) and Menegale (2024) furtherly argues that, to make this distance shorter, the online space needs to stimulate dialogue, student participation and interaction. Allowing students to take initiative, make choices, plan and monitor their actions, but also reflecting on the activities individually and collectively has the potential to promote autonomy in language learning and a sense of self-efficacy for the learners, whilst nourishing their motivation (Menegale, 2024).

Before moving on, it is deemed essential to problematize enthusiastic and acritical applications of technology. The possible assumption that technology-enhanced tools are neutral, innovative and apt only to improvement risks to conceal inequitable access and distribution of technologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated phenomena like the digital divide (Agung, Surtkanti, Quinones, 2020) and cannot be overlooked. Moore et al. (2021) highlight the impact of the pandemic on young people from an intersectional perspective, stating that this one, big crisis has been mingling with other broader socio-historically situated crises, exposing structural inequalities associated with class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and age. Moreover, this introductory article problematizes the educational context during this



specific historical moment, discussing 'asymmetrical emotional labours' and pointing out the deep disparities in digital infrastructure between private and public high schools in Mexico.

Hence, the risk of getting caught in 'technofatuation' intervention is strongly expressed by Yilmaz and Sogut (2022), who critique current applications of technology in language learning and express the need "to go beyond not only retooling the educational and social status quo but also reproducing stratification and oppression in societies" (p. 2).

Accessibility is not the only issue when discussing technology and education. While hypermedia has facilitated access to information and knowledge, it has however made the selection of sources and resources much more complex. Sanchez et al. (2006), for instance, observe how the reliability of information on the Internet can potentially be problematic if not correctly assessed by learners. More recent studies confirm that college students struggle to evaluate the accuracy of online information (McGrew et al., 2018), with an emphasis on the increasing number of online advertisements that receive more visibility when researching (Topal and Shargh, 2023).

Within this dissertation, technology can be seen as an opportunity for teachers to shift their focus to the learners' ability to reflect critically in order to achieve a perspective that values a reciprocal, enriching and dialogic citizenship formation (Mariotti, 2017). Furthermore, Varone (2021) observes how technology can allow for cooperation in the learning process, community building and meaning-making, analysing a fully remote online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, technological tools are represented here as means capable of giving learners the power to choose what and how to study (Nassini, 2020), and also the possibility for teachers to become professionals who help students to critically engage with the reality around them (Mariotti, 2020), de-standardising the teaching process and rethinking power logics in the educational process. A vision of technological and online tools as assisting learners in developing their critical thinking and awareness, whilst keeping in mind possible structural limitations and inequalities, is therefore useful when employing a more nuanced vision of pedagogy and knowledge transmission.

## 2.3 A Framework for Peer Tutoring in Europe and Italy

In order to frame peer tutoring it could be necessary to clarify additional terminology that refers to similar pedagogical practices. Torre (2006) distinguishes between 'mentoring', 'coaching' and 'counseling'. The first refers to a dual relationship involving a difference in age or expertise (still, it can also be conducted between peers) and that ultimately aims at developing specific skills both in the educational and professional context. 'Coaching', on the other hand, is mainly used in work-related situations, and 'counseling' addresses educational or work integration issues whilst also focusing on personal and relational matters. As for tutoring, Torre (2006) states that it is mainly employed for educational purposes, translating into practices that support the learner during the learning process, also contributing to developing responsibility and autonomy.

Topping (1996) offers one of the first definitions of peer tutoring as "people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching" (p.323). Hence, this definition frames peer tutoring as a reciprocal relationship where both parties learn from each other. It is to be noted, however, that many models of peer tutoring make learners continuously shift between the tutee and the tutor role so that this reciprocity is explicitly employed (Torre, 2006). Stigmar (2016) offers another definition of peer tutoring:

a peer tutor is anyone who is of familiar status as the person being tutored and operates as a complement and active partner with university teachers in the process of learning and teaching (p. 124)

Stigmar clarifies that the tutors, often senior students, are not teachers and as such they are not expected to teach or produce new instructional materials (nor evaluating students). However, the scholar stresses the fact that the advantage of peer tutoring relies not only on

the support for tutees but also on the benefits for the tutors themselves. It is argued that “when learners shift from being students as recipients to being productive teachers, it is likely they need to understand the material at a deeper level” (p. 125).

Tutoring and peer tutoring, states Da Re (2018), are rooted in a socio-constructivist approach to pedagogical practices. This approach promotes a higher degree of participation of the learner in the learning process. Drawing from Vygotsky’s theoretical framework, tutoring practices rely on the idea that there is a degree of development of one’s skill when guided by someone experienced or a peer. This degree has been called “the zone of proximal development” (Da Re, 2018; Torre, 2006). Da Re also reports that tutoring can reduce the distance between the learner and the learning process and facilitate communication, fostering a “less asymmetric structure” when confronted with pedagogical traditions (Da Re, 2018).

Historically, tutoring at the university level has been associated with the British tradition deriving from Oxford and Cambridge supervising. In these contexts, a supervisor (usually belonging to the teaching staff) guided small groups of students, and in addition, each student may have had an individual tutor (Goldschmid & Goldschmid, 1976; Torre, 2006). These practices belong to the broader definition of ‘pastoral care’, meaning the continuous support to the development of the individual as interpreted in geographical contexts such as the UK, the United States, Canada and Australia (Torre, 2006). Peer tutoring was first experimented in UK schools by Bell and Lancaster, and brought to Higher Education through specific programmes carried out by, for instance, the Free University of Berlin in 1951 (Goldschmid & Goldschmid, 1976; Torre, 2006). Torre (2006) also takes into account France’s tutoring model, which was introduced in 1984 to help freshmen students, and later on officially introduced in every French university in 1996. A year later, tutoring consisted of a specific semester dedicated to ‘informative’ practices, such as metacognitive approaches to studying techniques.

Da Re (2012) thus distinguishes the British tradition from the European tradition underlying that the main difference between these two approaches relies on the tutor role. As stated above, the UK (and the above-listed anglophone countries) has long been employing teaching staff to carry out tutoring practices, whereas other countries have variously employed peers.

This also applies to the Italian context, where tutoring practices were instituted to respond to both the growing bureaucratization of the university system and its economic needs, which required new teaching methodologies. A series of laws and declarations (law 341, 1990; the CRUI enactment of 1995; law 170 of the 11th of July 2003) eventually led to peer tutoring activities on the whole territory. Tutoring activities are distinguished, both from a national and European level, by a high degree of heterogeneity.

Bussu and Contini (2023), present a model for peer mentoring in Italy, Ecuador and the UK, stressing the importance of learners' well-being, life-skills development and community building. Mentoring, as already mentioned, has by definition a broader aim compared to tutoring. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the framework employed by Bussu and Contini can be valuable with respect to adopting a stance that does not clearly distinguish between 'educational' and 'life' skills, as they are all the same part of the development of the learner within the societal context. Bussu and Contini (2023) stress the relevance of this aspect of mentoring (or tutoring) so that its pedagogical implications are aimed at engaging students and allowing them the opportunity to become active and agentic learners, in order to conduct a "self-managed life" (Freire, 1970, as in Bussu&Contini, 2023). Moreover, the challenge relies in building a sense of community and social cohesion between diverse students coming from a variety of backgrounds. They state that

one important goal of Higher education is to support healthy and promotional relationships in the Academic Context to provide open educational spaces for dialogue and exchange between diverse communities, and to train active citizenship. (Bussu&Contini, 2023, p.114).

In consideration of the above, it can be concluded that pedagogical practices such as peer tutoring, when informed by a transformative approach, might be an opportunity for higher education to encourage inquiry, interconnectivity, and community building. This is here

believed to be achievable through careful consideration of previous learning approaches and the role of the teacher/tutor within this context.

The next chapter will illustrate the case study and the methodology, highlighting its particularity and how it has been investigated.

### 3. Methodology

This chapter will outline the methodology and case study employed in this dissertation. Firstly, in paragraph 3.1 I will introduce the case study and the rationale behind its selection by further explaining the first year Bachelor's degree Japanese course.

I will also introduce the Language Education (Japan) Master's course, detailed in paragraph 3.1.1, which employs the NoLBrick framework (see Chapter 2, paragraph 2.1.1). This class, introducing the action research methodology, since its beginning in 2020 has used applied case studies for participant observation. In the same period of time of the tutoring activities, from September until December, the NoLBrick framework has also been applied to one of the four classes for Japanese Language at the Bachelor's level (see paragraph 3.1, table 6). Consequently, I decided to interview a student who took part in both the tutoring sessions and the class taught using the NoLBrick approach.

In paragraph 3.2 I will outline the methodology used for sampling, structuring and analysing the four interviews. The case study was investigated through a qualitative approach as it aimed at gathering a deeper understanding of the students' perspectives. Consequently, the interviewees were selected from students attending tutoring sessions, and were interviewed by the tutor for the purpose of this study. The choice of conducting interviews was made for ethical reasons, as conducting class observation through fieldwork notes risked conflicting with the tutor's institutional role and potentially impeding the participation of students who did not wish to take part in the study. For this reason, the interviews were conducted only after the conclusion of the activities, providing a detailed consent form outlining the research objectives.

Additionally, my status as an insider to the case study context needs to be addressed. While this insider status has facilitated data gathering, such as the number of students enrolled in the Japanese language programme, it also constituted a possible source of unintentional bias, which has been mitigated through a process of constant reflexivity and grounding in theory. Despite these considerations, this insider perspective, stemming from being a

Japanese language graduate student and a student of the Language Education (Japan) class, but also a Japanese language tutor pertaining to the same context of the case study, was approached as a source of insights that might not have been accessible otherwise. The value of shared experiences facilitated building a dialogue with the interviewees that might not have been the same if the interviewer had a different status and has allowed the analysis to begin with a greater familiarity to the beliefs, values and rules behind those conversations. Consequently, this has facilitated the understanding of the case study and allowed for a detailed interpretation, but also critique, to the particular situation addressed in this dissertation.

### 3.1 Tutoring Activities (Case Study)

The case study will examine, through a qualitative approach, tutoring activities for first-year Bachelor's Japanese language students at Ca' Foscari University of Venice conducted weekly entirely online using the Zoom platform from the beginning of the semester (September) until its conclusion (December) for a total of 12 weekly sessions of 1 hour and a half. The tutor was required to complete 30 hours of work, including group sessions, material preparation, and individual sessions, if required by the students. Table 6 details the number of hours institutionally mandated for each class. The average attendance ranged from a maximum of 32 participants to a minimum of 4 by the end of the semester, out of over 250 enrolled students in the Bachelor's programme. Since attendance is not mandatory, students chose weekly whether or not to attend tutoring sessions. The decrease in attendance towards the end of the semester may perhaps be attributed to the fact that students felt more confident after attending several weeks of classes and/or tutoring, thereby not perceiving the need to participate in tutoring sessions.

Choosing tutoring sessions as a case study is linked to their uniqueness as a peer-to-peer service without any authority figure, such as a teacher. This particular pedagogical situation creates its own pedagogical and power issues, similar to those observed in the facilitator-

student dynamics in dialogic classrooms (Arleoni, 2016; Alessandrini, 2020), which often tend to reproduce hierarchical schemes not so far from the teacher-student relationship. Thus, the tutor-student relationship can be interpreted as both a peer-to-peer kind of interaction, since both parties are still students, but also as a hierarchical relationship, with the tutor assuming a renewed authority role.

The introduction has attempted to capture the particularity of the context by framing it within the institutional setting and the objective of tutoring activities in this specific context. Additionally, it has highlighted the proportion of ECTS dedicated to the Japanese language (30% of the total for the first year; see Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.3.1, table 3) and the high number of students enrolled in the curriculum. Within this framework, tutors, selected through a competitive process evaluating their grades and curriculum,<sup>41</sup> are suggested to design tutoring sessions aimed at repetition and drills of class contents.

The participants to tutoring sessions seemed to be attending classes from the beginning, or at least with a delay of one or two weeks. Students attending tutoring sessions did not have many difficulties answering and interacting during sessions, indicating that they were probably already proficient in the language. This raises questions about the target of the tutoring service, and the students that actually attend it. The population of students attending the Bachelor's programme, as outlined in Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.3.1, primarily comprises Italian female students residing outside the province of Venice. According to a survey conducted at the beginning of classes in September in the same period of the case study, out of over 120 respondents, the majority of students (57.1%) had not previously studied Japanese before university, while nearly 38% of the respondents studied it autonomously. The same sample, when asked about their motivation to learn Japanese at University, cited their interests in Japanese pop culture and media including manga, anime and music. A smaller group of students, including those who already studied Japanese in high school, also expressed an

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<sup>41</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. *Regolamento servizio di tutorato*. Retrieved from [https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user\\_upload/dipartimenti/DSAAM/documenti/lavora-con-noi/tutorato/2023-2024/Bando\\_n\\_882\\_II\\_sem\\_23-24\\_per\\_web.pdf](https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSAAM/documenti/lavora-con-noi/tutorato/2023-2024/Bando_n_882_II_sem_23-24_per_web.pdf)



interest in Japanese literature, art, cinema, fashion and music, but also folklore and religion. Some of the responding students are driven by more pragmatic reasons, such as seeking employment in Japan or in the translation industry. The primary motivation appears to be the desire to learn the language in order to potentially move to Japan.

Before further explaining the tutoring sessions, it is deemed necessary to properly contextualise the case study within the Japanese language course, for which the tutoring was employed.

The Japanese Language course during the first year is spread across two semesters and divided into two parts (module one and module two). At Ca' Foscari University, the academic year starts in September and ends in June, with a small break between the end of December and January for the Christmas holidays and the first examination period of the year. Therefore, the first semester begins in September and ends in late December, and the second semester usually begins in early February and ends at the end of May, leaving the months of June and early September for further examinations.

First-year Japanese language students in the first semester are expected to enrol in September after a selection over a closed number of 250 places available and attend weekly classes until they undergo an online test assessing their knowledge of the contents of the semester in January/February, as they can choose to take the exam between two dates. The test does not result in a mark, but it is a prerequisite for proceeding to the second and final part of the exam in June, which thoroughly evaluates oral and written competencies, awarding the ECTS of the course.

Each exam is propaedeutic to the other, meaning that students before proceeding to the second year's Japanese language exam must pass the first year's exam beforehand. Typically, the semester consists of 15 weeks of classes, resulting in 180 hours total of classroom learning. Distributing the hours required to obtain 18 credits (450) over the two semesters, students are expected to dedicate an equivalent of 225 hours to studying during the first semester. Subtracting the 180 hours of class attendance, this leaves around 45 hours

per semester of independent study (see table 6). Some of these hours can also be spent during online practices, further lowering the time dedicated to out of class learning.

Classes are divided into five main areas. One class is conducted by the titular professor, a faculty staff member who explains grammatical topics in Italian. The remaining classes are conducted by Foreign Language Experts (CEL), and mainly focus on learning Chinese characters (kanji) during writing classes and reading the course textbook dialogues and examples while practising through repetition, pattern drills, role-playing, and conversation.

As introduced in Chapter 1, paragraph 1.3.1, this approach recalls a structural view of language education (Balboni, 2015), where frontal explanations by a teacher and memorization by the student are privileged. The course employs a textbook, Shin Bunka Shokyū Nihongo (2007) which is integrated by ad hoc materials produced by the CEL consisting of grammatical exercises but also writing and conversational contents for their respective classes. This shows the complexity and also reflects the weight of the 18 ECTS on the learning process; as a matter of fact, students attend five classes weekly of 1.5 hours, which need to be further integrated with independent study.

Table 6 Bachelor's First Year Japanese Language Classes' Schedule and Flow.

Type of class	1st Semester 9 ECTS = (225h - 45h individual learning) = 180h					Not included in the 180 hours	2nd Semester 9 ECTS = (225h - 45h individual learning) = 180h					Not included in the 180 hours
	Titular professor	Writing class	Conversation class	Grammar class	Textbook class	Peer tutoring (Case study)	Titular professor	Writing class	Conversation class	Grammar class	Textbook class	Peer tutoring
Total hours	30	30	30	60	30	30	30	30	30	60	30	30
Expected n° of students per class	72	05	48	57	57	250 (Average attendance 15-20)	72	95	57	57	57	250
Number of weekly classes	4	3	6	5	5	1	4	3	5	5	5	N/D
1	Professor 1 A-C	CEL 1 A-E	CEL 3 A-B	CEL 4 A-B	CEL 1 A-B		Professor 3 A-C	CEL 1 A-E	CEL 3 A-B	CEL 4 A-B	CEL 1 A-B	
2	Professor 2 D-L	CEL 2 F-O	CEL 3 C-E	CEL 4 C-E	CEL 1 C-E		Professor 4 D-L	CEL 2 F-O	CEL 3 C-E	CEL 4 C-E	CEL 1 C-E	
3	Professor 1 M-R	CEL 1 P-Z	CEL 3 F-L	CEL 4 F-L	CEL 6 F-L		Professor 4 M-R	CEL 1 P-Z	CEL 3 F-L	CEL 4 F-L	CEL 6 F-L	
4	Professor 2 S-Z		CEL 3 M-O	CEL 5 M-P	CEL 6 M-P		Professor 4 S-Z		CEL 3 M-O	CEL 5 M-P	CEL 6 M-P	
5			CEL 3 P-S	CEL 5 Q-Z	CEL 6 Q-Z				CEL 3 P-S	CEL 5 Q-Z	CEL 6 Q-Z	
6			CEL 3 T-Z						CEL 3 T-Z			

Tutoring, within this context, is conceived to play a supportive role towards the substantial number of students who enrol during the first semester of the first year, offering additional training to help students keep up with class contents through both group and individual support. Given that a number of students usually withdraw after being selected by the standardised test, those who were not initially selected can still enrol until November through a repechage process. This results in students starting classes with a varying delay of up to several weeks, and the need for tutors to help them 'get back on track' with the programme.

The tutoring activities of the case study have been carried out following the assumptions outlined in the introduction and literature review, whilst also considering the institutional needs and class requirements of the Japanese language course, such as repetition of class contents and providing exercises aiming to prepare students for the test. This means that activities were mainly concerned with reviewing class materials with a focus on grammatical topics, as it was the primary institutional objective of tutoring.

Moreover, the sessions were carried out following the pedagogical assumption that purposefully designed activities that engaged the students in the first person and limited the amount of explanations by the tutor could stimulate students' autonomy and agency in their learning process as well, but also, in the case of synchronous sessions, reduce the distance between the participants (Menegale, 2024). To this extent, activities included both frontal explanations of grammatical content and exercises with a focus on employing an active and dialogic approach to language learning. This has been achieved by creating specific custom worksheets (see figure 8) which have been employed during the activities. The worksheets were a medium to coordinate the activities, which were inspired by the theoretical framework of autonomy in language learning. According to Benson (2013), a number of investigations have demonstrated that students who are required to actively look for information and present their findings to their peers through collaborative work in groups, altogether with reflection over their learning process, experience benefits for their language learning. For instance, the scholar reports a worksheet employed during language learning projects at the University of Hong Kong where students were prompted to describe the activities but also write down titles

of any materials they have used, and comment on the activities in order to reflect about both positive and negative aspects.

With this in mind, the worksheets were conceived to be used by the students in small break-out rooms and were designed to make students self-retrieve and reflect on grammatical structures and the resources available to them. The worksheets consisted of shared documents on Google Drive so that students could modify them in groups in real time and retrieve information at a later moment, even when activities were concluded, so that these documents could be used as study materials. To complete these worksheets, students were divided into small breakout rooms without the tutor. This was thought to mitigate any anxiety or pressure deriving from the tutor's presence in order to allow discussion and cooperation between peers. The tutor regularly jumped on and off the break out rooms to check on students.

Each group was assigned a specific grammatical topic, and after completing the worksheet, the tutor facilitated a discussion in Italian with everyone, posing questions and inviting each group to explain what they had found in their own words to the tutor and their peers. This activity was conceived to enable students to listen, ask questions and actively engage in the discussion. Assuming the role of tutors themselves, as they were the one explaining information and bringing examples to their peers, the prompt aimed at encouraging students to deepen their understanding of the grammatical topics of the Japanese language course whilst gaining new perspectives from their peers, aiming at an active and fluid approach to learning and knowledge transmission.

The instructions inside the worksheets were provided in Japanese and students were allowed to freely access any translator and easily copy-paste the text, coherently with the NoLBrick approach, thus regardless of them being considered 'zero beginners'. The worksheets were structured into four columns to guide and stimulate students in their research activity. In the first column, students were suggested to write the grammatical rule of a given topic corresponding to a specific content previously covered in the Japanese language class programme. In the second column, students were prompted to provide an example of the usage of this grammatical topic. In the third column, they were required to state the source of

both the rule and the example. Lastly, the fourth column was conceived to allow students to freely write down any doubts, questions, or curiosities that arose during the process. Moreover, Google Docs offers the possibility to access the document through both the personal/institutional account or without accessing, so that students could also write anonymously if they wanted to.

This division was designed to facilitate the reporting of information during the discussion activities, and guide learners throughout the activities; navigating through each section, students were required to look in the first person for the grammatical topic, but also look for an example and a reliable source. This was supposed to prompt them to reflect and select information over a quantity of sources and decide which to use based on their usefulness and reliability. While the tutor recommended using Jalea, students were given the freedom to choose their own sources. Examples could include phrases, but also images and videos, or any other material that students found interesting and helpful for understanding and remembering the grammatical topic. The fact that they had to clearly document their sources was to a) ensure that the completed worksheets could be also used as review materials, allowing a swift retrieval of information, and b) check through the discussion activity the reliability of the employed sources. Finally, they were prompted to reflect on their difficulties or curiosities, stimulating active reflection.

Putting students in charge of retrieving information was supposed to make them responsible for both their own learning and that of their peers, as the shared information was equally used by both parties, and learners were responsible for collecting and sharing information that they found useful. Cooperation was supposed to make them aware that their learning was not solely 'dependent' on the teacher, but also on themselves and their peers. Failure to cooperate or conduct throughout research could result in gathering little or inaccurate information that could hinder the learning process.

Gathering information required them to actively pose themselves and each other questions through cooperative learning, re-elaborating content and realising their efficacy without a teacher or a tutor. This means that students, by working by themselves and collecting

information, were prompted to realise that they could gather information on their own and did not need a tutor or a teacher to learn a topic related to the Japanese language. The tutor did not engage in formal correction but suggested alternatives as a participant to the activities. When presenting grammatical topics, the information was gathered similarly to how students were gathering information through worksheets. This was supposed to show participants that the tutor did not hold 'the truth', breaking down authoritative barriers and fostering their willingness to express their difficulties.

Figure 8 Example of a Worksheet Employed During Tutoring Activities

**Let's search in groups for informations!**  
**グループで情報を探しましょう！**

- In the "rule" column, let's write the grammar explanation.  
 「ルール」欄には、文法説明を書きましょう。
- In the "example column, let's write a phrase, photo or video (realia)  
 「例文」には、その文法項目が含む文章や写真、ビデオ（生資料）  
 concerning the grammatical rule  
 を書きましょう。
- In the "reference" column, let's write where we took the information from.  
 「参考」には、その情報はどこから得たかを書きましょう。リン  
 It's ok to write both the textbook's page number or the website link.  
 クや教科書のページを書いてもいいです。
- In the "I would like to know more" column, let's write about any difficulties  
 「もっと知りたい点」には、わかりにくかった点や、気に入った  
 or something that was interesting to you.  
 点などを書きましょう。

"wa" (particle)  
**「は」 (助詞)**

ルール rule	例文 example(s)	参考 reference(s)	もっと 知りたい点 I would like to know more

### 3.1.1 Language Education (Japan) Class and Seminar

The master's course of Language Education (Japan), led by Mariotti, has been introduced at Ca' Foscari since 2020, marking the first course of its kind in Italy. The theoretical framework pertains to the NoLBrick approach, with the aim to engage students in "Japanese Language Education for Social Responsibility", allowing them to critically analyse and reflect over a number of topics such as the historical panorama of Japanese language education, but also discuss over empowerment of the individual/group and transformative approaches to language teaching.

Applying a flipped classroom and an active learning approach, the Language Education (Japan) class is associated with an applied case study that consists of active attendance of Japanese language contexts and classrooms.<sup>42</sup> Participants apply the action-research framework, producing fieldwork notes and discussing their opinions and observations through seminars.

This course, conducted during the first semester, has also been analysing the same Bachelor's Japanese language course of the case study. Between four classes (see table 6) conducted by the professor responsible for Japanese classes, one of these has followed the NoLBrick approach. Some of the students belonging to the same group of Bachelor's first year students which tutoring sessions were aimed at, then, also experienced this approach during their classes, and interacted with both facilitators and the NoLBrick dialogic writing process as mandatory coursework.

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<sup>42</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia (last update 11/09/2023). *Language Education (Japan)*. Retrieved from <https://www.unive.it/data/course/368748/programma>



## 3.2 Interviews

The four interviews were carried out synchronously online at the end of the first semester, in late December, through the Zoom platform. This was supposed to facilitate the availability of the respondents, but also of the interviewer, who was not resident in Venice. The interviews were conducted in Italian, the native language of both the interviewer, the tutor, and the interviewees, four students who attended tutoring sessions, and translated in English afterwards. They were structured into four sections, the first three following a structured outline with specific questions, while the last section followed a semi-structured outline covering broader and more general topics. These sections were built in order to obtain the required information gradually, starting with general descriptions or information and then moving on to particular questions or prompts. (Merriam&Tisdell, 2015).

Employing a purposeful sampling method (Merriam&Tisdell, 2015), four interviewees were selected. The small sample size was considered suitable and representative of the average attendance in tutoring sessions, which typically involved around 15-20 students, with a considerable decrease towards the end of the semester. As stated before, this decrease does not have a clear cause, but can perhaps be related to an increase in the students' confidence after attending several weeks of classes. Two were chosen as 'representative' examples of learners who attended the majority of tutoring sessions (student A and B), while the other two were selected as unique, rare examples (student C and D). Student C was the only student who constantly attended both tutoring sessions and Japanese language classes with a dialogic approach, whereas student D attended tutoring activities but did not experience the dialogic approach, although he directly expressed enthusiasm to the tutor for the approach employed during tutoring activities. The interviewees were properly informed beforehand about the purpose of the interview through an informed consent document, which included the title and abstract of the research.

The interview questions were prepared by drawing upon previous research in the field of autonomy and empowerment in language learning (Chan, Spratt, Humphreys, 2002; Frymier, Shulman and Houser, 1996) in order to ground the research into current knowledge and eventually compare the results. Some questions were thus repurposed from the aforementioned literature. However, due to the particularity of the case study, the small sample size, and the theoretical framework employed, the questions were primarily designed in order to highlight the transformative and critical aspects of autonomy. The interview questions can be found in the appendix.

Part one of the interview was designed to gather background information about the interviewee, such as demographic and anagraphic details. Initially, participants were asked about their birth year, in order to locate their answers within their generational context. Subsequently, they were asked about their prior experience with the Japanese language, including a) if they had already studied it, where, and how, but also b) thoroughly investigating their studying habits both in and out of the classroom. For those who had not previously studied Japanese, they were asked to describe their experience with other foreign languages. Moving on to their university experience, this first part of the interview delved into their status, including whether they were currently attending classes and if they started attending classes right at the beginning of the semester or joined later on. Lastly, participants were prompted to describe their experience during Japanese language classes at the university, eventually comparing it with previous language learning experiences.

As for part two, students were extensively asked about tutoring activities and their studying habits of the Japanese language after enrolling in university. Questions involved both their emotional perspective, investigating their perceptions and self-awareness, and concrete examples of their language learning habits conducted without explicit solicitation by any authoritative figure, emphasising autonomy and self-direction.

In part three, students were asked about the perceptions of the online tools employed during tutoring sessions, such as Jalea and CAFOSCARI Jisho. Questions delved into their

frequency of use and explored possible correlations between their usage and autonomous learning.

Lastly, part four introduced broader inputs and left more space for students to express their perspectives on autonomy, the tutoring service overall, as well as cooperative and online learning experiences during tutoring sessions.

The analysis subsequent to data gathering has employed a thematic analysis, identifying and creating recurring themes and patterns across the interviews through an inductive and comparative process, finally leading to the establishment of a group of categories (also called “analytical coding”, Merriam&Tisdell, 2015). This re-contextualisation process allowed to leave out information unrelated to the purpose of the study.

Table 7 An overview of the Interviews' structure

Interview's section	Objectives
<b>Part 1</b>	Background and demographic informations; examine the level of autonomy in studying Japanese or other languages in general, both prior to and after entering university.
<b>Part 2</b>	Tutoring experience and study habits: assess the awareness of autonomy in language study.
<b>Part 3</b>	Examine the frequency of using departmental tools and investigate their correlation with self-study habits.
<b>Part 4</b> (Unstructured/informal)	Exploration of broader aspects of autonomy and tutoring; investigate various aspects of autonomy and tutoring, including cooperative learning and online learning.

## 4. Analysis & Discussion

### 4.1 Analysis

The following paragraphs will outline the findings of the interviews, which were divided into three main thematic areas: students' expectations, dependency, and autonomy. To facilitate the narrative description of the results the first two areas have been combined into paragraph 4.1.1. An additional finding, competition, will be presented in paragraph 4.1.3. This theme emerged in association with cooperative learning and has been analysed as an unexpected result that was not anticipated by the interviewer's questions.

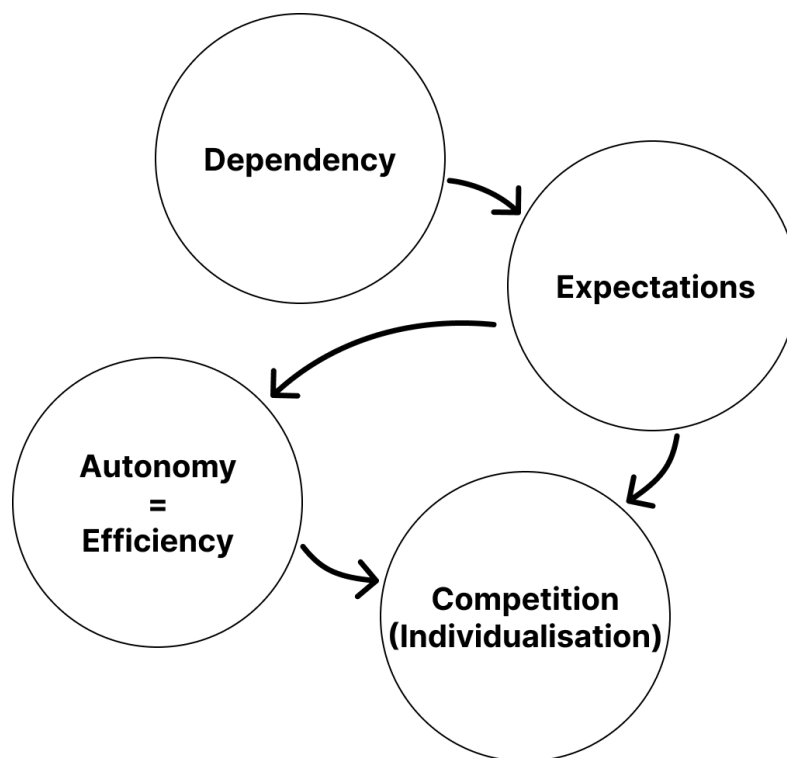
The findings were categorised following students' answers to various prompts and questions. The answers have thus been selected for both their relevance to the problem statement and the frequency with which they arose during interviews. In order to understand the implications of tutoring practices aimed at fostering critical thinking, active reflection and learning practices that challenge assumptions and power relations, the aforementioned four thematic areas have been found critical. These insights have provided a clearer understanding of the students' standpoint and perceptions about the educational environment of the case study. Furthermore, they allowed to consider how their participation in tutoring sessions might have fostered a sense of agency and autonomy.

As shown in figure 9, these thematic areas can be read as interconnected, underscoring the complex dynamics at play within the case study. The interviews revealed a sense of dependency, as students expected the tutor to provide clear content and a structured learning environment, assuming the responsibility of the learning process. Within the specific context of the case study, these expectations may perhaps stem from structural elements such as the proportion of ECTS (30% of the total for the first year; see Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.3.1, table 3) and study hours (225 classroom study, and 45 independent study; see Chapter 4, Paragraph 3.1, table 6) dedicated to Japanese language.

These aspects may contribute to a sense of individualisation and competition, thereby inhibiting cooperation.

Autonomy, on the other hand, is perceived primarily as an individual learning endeavour, essential for aligning with these structural components of the educational environment and achieving the expected outcomes, ultimately equating with efficiency.

Figure 9 Analysis Results of the Online Interviews Conducted After Tutoring Activities for Japanese Language Students.



#### 4.1.1 Dependency on the Tutor and Students' Expectations

Every interviewed student is 19 years old, with the exception of student A, who is one year older. All of them attended Japanese language classes throughout the first semester and started attending with the beginning of classes in September, except for student B, who joined a week later due to the ranking repechage.

Students generally reported quite positive opinions about both classroom learning and tutoring sessions. Concerning tutoring sessions, however, student B and student C have expressed a preference for direct explanation over active learning practices.

For instance, student B stated that

*The only thing is that sometimes, maybe when... for example, someone asked something... [...] the point is, you said, "try to look [for yourself]". But in my opinion, people don't always necessarily understand that...what they're looking for themselves. Also, **because I think you know a lot more about grammar. You have more experience so in my opinion maybe...explanations made by the person who knows more, you know, in my opinion are understood better.** (Student B; the bold is mine).*

Student C answers the same question accordingly. As stated before, student C was the only student attending both tutoring sessions and Japanese classes with a dialogic approach, NoLBrick (see Chapter 2, paragraph 2.1.1), which he reported to have found "difficult" because classes were entirely in Japanese and he did not feel capable of conducting the activities using the language. About his 'ideal' tutoring, he stated that.

*[I would] explain the rules and then focus on doing exercises, so I would just spend most of the time on doing exercises. Together, maybe not independently, but doing exercises together with the...with the tutor or the teacher, anyway, who is doing the tutoring. (Student C).*

What student B and C are stating can be interpreted as expressing a sense of dependency on the tutor, as they state a preference for not operating without what now seems to have become a new authority figure. On this point, student D further elaborates on the tutor's role, expressing that on one hand, the tutor occupies an in-the-middle role between a teacher and a student, offering more empathy towards the student. On the other hand, the tutor is associated with a teacher, and their authority is deemed necessary in order to learn successfully.

*Well, let's say that unlike [during] tutoring, you try to make do as well as you can. [During tutoring] instead **there is a tutor who is almost like a teacher**, so maybe they can help you if you have any doubts that maybe are not so clear, they solve them quickly. (Student D; the bold is mine).*

These statements can be thus interpretable as indicating a sense of dependency on the teacher/tutor and may also reflect a lack of awareness of the students' own agency and autonomy in language learning. Students appear to aim to efficiently acquire classroom knowledge, and the tutor is thus necessary in order to achieve it. Without the tutor, students seem as if they do not feel fully capable of learning. They rely on the tutor/teacher and the university as the primary sources of their knowledge and validation. Tests seem to be viewed as the only method for assessing their capabilities, and the course programme is thus seen as the accredited means for acknowledgement. When asked if they feel competent in studying autonomously, student A replied that

*Competent... I mean, I set my own goals, **but I'm not sure I'm competent until I take the exam. I have no concrete ways to test what I do.** [...] I study autonomously and I do*

*what I know I have to do. But I don't know if my efforts are,  
**I mean my efforts will become concrete when I take the  
test, I think.** (Student A; the bold is mine)*

What has been analysed until now can be also connected to their expectations, as students A, B and C frequently used words like 'programme', 'structure', 'organisation', 'coherence' as important keywords during their interviews. The recurrency of these keywords suggests that their dependency may be linked to their expectations. Students expect their tutoring sessions, and their language learning environment in general, to be clear and structured, but most importantly, teacher driven. They did not express a need for personalisation, which might have suggested a preference for a learner-centred approach, even when asked about their ideal tutoring session. The focal point of their attention is thus fulfilling the institutional requirements.

Table 10 An Overview of the Insights about Dependency and Students' Expectations

Insights	Description
Dependency on tutor	Students' preference for direct explanations reflects a dependency on the tutor as an authority figure rather than self-directed learning. Moreover, students look at the tutor as more 'knowledgeable' and 'almost like a teacher'.
Reliance on formal assessments	Students rely on tests and formal assessments to validate their competencies, showing a lack of self-confidence in their autonomous learning abilities.

#### 4.1.2 Autonomy as Efficiency

Each student has to some degree studied Japanese before entering University. Two interviewees mentioned private lessons with a teacher, with student A specifically attending conversational classes with a native speaker. Everyone, however, has at various points adopted informal learning strategies, such as using videos, music, or textbooks recommended



by teachers or other Japanese language students online, as well as language learning apps and websites. Significantly, none of them reported having formally studied Japanese before university, as in Italy, Japanese is still mostly studied in Higher Education.<sup>43</sup>

While it is noteworthy that these students took initiative and pursued informal Japanese language study prior to university, setting personal learning goals and objectives, it is also necessary to address the potential dependency on teachers and study materials employed in their informal learning. As student C stated, their main motivation originated from the desire to “not arrive at university knowing nothing”, thus suggesting a reliance on external guidance and resources.

When asked about their university learning experience, every student reported dedicating more time to studying outside the classroom than before entering university, as the teaching is reported as fast paced and they do not wish to fall behind. Outside the classroom, their study sessions typically revolve around practising drills and exercises for their weekly classes, looking at the syllabus or classroom content as the guideline for their studying.

Additionally, they also reported supplementing their learning sessions with several tools. For instance, students A and B reported using reading websites to improve their reading skills, student B employed TV series, and both students C and D mentioned using music to train their translation skills. Furthermore, interviewees report continuing to use some of the tools they had already employed before university, such as dictionary apps and language learning apps. Although these approaches could suggest a tendency to actively engage in language learning beyond formal learning, the fact that the main objective of their studying coincides with the successful acquisition of class content raises questions about whether these patterns can be interpreted as autonomous learning as framed in this dissertation.

When asked about their confidence in choosing what and how to study by themselves, student C reported that

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<sup>43</sup> The Japan Foundation. Survey report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.jpff.go.jp/e/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey2021/All\\_contents\\_r2.pdf#page=15.99](https://www.jpff.go.jp/e/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey2021/All_contents_r2.pdf#page=15.99)

*Yes, I mean, I would review my notes a little bit, I mean I would follow what has been done in class, so maybe check the slides again...I review my notes, I consult Shinbunka [the course textbook]...And...I go by topics, like unit one talked about this [topic] so I go over it, unit two talked about this other [topic] so I restudy this other one. (Student C).*

What is interesting about this answer is the fact that Student C spontaneously and immediately related to the course programme when asked about autonomous learning, assuming that the question was directly related to it.

In addition, regarding informal learning, student A mentioned that





*I would say that my study of Japanese, I treat like an interval between the study of cultural subjects. Maybe if I'm studying, I study a chapter of English and then I study kanji maybe for a couple of hours, [...] then I do, I mean, balance with the rest, that way, it doesn't become too much. [...] So I have to make an effort to remember things, because they're not, 'fresh', and that also helps me a bit to make an effort to memorise. And so, I take a break between one thing and another and they result in being more enjoyable. (Student A).*

Student A mentioned using study techniques similar to interleaving and active recall, revealing metacognitive skills about her study approach, as she demonstrates an understanding of the most efficient way for her to both retain and retrieve information. When asked to evaluate her ability to study autonomously, she rated herself four out of five. However,

similar to student C, she also equated autonomy with efficiently studying course materials, as she expressed feeling autonomous because of her ability to manage course studying throughout the semester.

When questioned about their sense of autonomy and asked to assign themselves a number from one to five, student B also rates herself as four and a half, whereas student C rates himself between three and four, and student D as two.

Table 8 Students' Perception of Their Autonomy on a Scale of 1 to 5

Students	Perception of autonomy
Student A	
Student B	
Student C	
Student D	

Student D appears to be the one expressing more openly his need to study beyond classroom learning, stating that

*Because if I'm in a bad mood, I can't even open a book and instead if I'm in a good mood I put on a video and mainly my study method is based a lot [on this], actually it's based a lot on doing what I like, but in my own way. That is, without necessarily using the list that they gave me at university, like maybe I'll look up songs...(Student D).*

Notably, given the fact that students mainly associated autonomy with efficiency, student D assessed himself so lowly because he struggled with concentrating and keeping up with the programme schedule.

The self-assessment revealed varying degrees of how students perceived themselves as autonomous. However, when asked whether they would feel able to study without external guidance and if they believe they have the power to contribute to important decisions and influence their own learning, each interviewee expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities. For instance, student B mentioned that she has just begun studying, so she does not feel capable of approaching 'complicated' topics. Student C stated that

*More or less, I mean, yes, but maybe... if I study completely autonomously maybe at some point I get lost. And I get lost meaning that maybe I go...too far, I mean, I look at the topic and I see that there's something similar that maybe in reality goes further on [from the programme], and then maybe I do.....**I don't follow the programme anymore, that means, I go beyond the programme.** (Student C; *The bold is mine*).*

By observing this, it appears that students indeed feel the need for guidance and leads to reconsider their autonomous learning, identified within their informal learning practices and utilisation of additional tools. In fact, although every interviewed student has taken initiative at some point, studying what they wanted and how they wanted, they strongly rely on the programme as a source of validation. Hence, they do not feel autonomous because autonomy is strictly related to performing well in their formal learning. Informal learning is employed to varying degrees but is not valued, as it appears functional to the alignment with a pre-existing programme.

When asked about tutoring sessions, each student referred to them as “restudying” sessions and deemed it essential that sessions aligned with classroom learning and contents, finding them useful in this regard. Moreover, when discussing if tutoring sessions had helped them become more autonomous learners, student A replied that they had introduced her to more tools, such as the Jalea website, or new dictionary apps, and mentioned the shared worksheets. After attending tutoring sessions, student C stated that

*I feel like... I can...I can do it on my own, I mean... I have a basis, some basis, and so I can do something on my own.*  
(Student C).

Moreover, student A commented that

*We had to put ourselves... in the first person, to look up for... the information to fill these worksheets. I mean, they were partly autonomous work because they were then corrected and revised, but the research was quite personal, everybody looking from different materials, so that's another autonomous aspect, I think.* (Student A).

Student A describes worksheet activities as ‘partly autonomous’, perhaps misunderstanding the concluding discussion of the activities as formal correction by the tutor.

Moreover, student D stated that these sessions were engaging and ‘familiar’, all in all a positive experience, mentioning that

*I actually found them [the worksheet activities] also fun, even the fact that I had to look for some things [referring to grammatical topics]. And it's not the usual teacher's*

*explanation. Even discussing with other students to discover things that I may not have seen, I may not have noticed and vice versa. (Student D).*

When asked about the use of Jalea and CAFOSCARI Jisho, three out of four students stated that they were using one or another and found them to be useful supports for autonomous studying. The only interviewee who did not use these tools was student B, who preferred using the same apps and tools from before university. Students reported that the apps developed by the NoLBrick research group were helpful for their studying; however, they sometimes lacked usability. The main feature that was appreciated was their efficiency and clarity, with students reporting that they saved them time during studying.

In conclusion, students have frequently associated autonomy with efficiency and the successful acquisition of both in-class and out-of-class content. When prompted about decision-making and responsibility, or the power they think they have over their learning process, students expressed uncertainty. Their self-directed learning, which could be identified with out-of-class learning, even when not strictly prompted or directed by someone else, seems primarily aimed at aligning themselves with the programme requirements, rather than engaging in decision-making. This may indicate a reliance on formal validation and a focus on meeting institutional expectations rather than exercising autonomy in their language learning.

Table 9 An Overview of the Major Insights about Students' Autonomy

Insights	Description
Students association of autonomy with efficiency	Autonomy is perceived as the ability to efficiently learn class content and achieve pre established outcomes.
Informal learning is a means to align with the programme	Informal learning is not strictly autonomous as it is used to meet institutional expectations.

### 4.1.3 Cooperative Learning, Competition and Discomfort

When asked about cooperative learning, three out of four interviewees spontaneously mentioned competition towards their peers. One important aspect of this finding is that it was not anticipated from the interview outline.

To varying degrees, three interviewees reported difficulties in interacting with their peers, with only student C not aligning with this statement. Student A, B and D stated that cooperating with their peers during tutoring was difficult and that interactions were minimal or non-existent. When asked about the cause, they reported perceiving a strong sense of competition between peers both during tutoring sessions and classroom learning, especially from students who had already studied the language for a longer period of time and were able to interact with the teacher in the classroom. Student B stated that

*There are people in my class who have already studied [Japanese] anyway, who maybe went to Japan, or maybe just as soon as the professor says something, then they immediately have it in their head [they already know it], so... and it happens quite often that I feel maybe intimidated. [...] And in my cohort there must be at least fifteen people who know things just like that, as soon as the teacher says something, they don't even know what they are thinking, they already know how to say it. Which sometimes is a bit of an issue because maybe I'm trying to think of the answer, but there's always someone saying it. (Student B)*

This feeling of discomfort is also reported by student A, who stated

*I was expecting to arrive [at university] and find a context where, I mean, everyone was starting more or less from scratch, and I imagined there would be people...[who might have had] like a bit of a general smattering [of Japanese], like how I had tried to do, but I found people who were much more competent and maybe, I was a little bit in the beginning... [...] I mean I felt like I was behind, despite the fact that we were all at the beginning and despite the fact that I had already done an autonomous study, yes.*  
*(Student A)*

Moreover, student D also elaborated on the pressure by his peers in relation to the authority and prestige associated with studying Japanese at Ca' Foscari University

*Well, the fact that being here in Venice is... you can feel the pressure. [...] Well, let's say that if one thinks about wanting to study one Oriental language, in our case Japanese, one immediately thinks of Ca' Foscari University. Also, because in Italy it's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Japanese.*

[When asked if he feels some pressure about this]:

*Yes, absolutely, even maybe from classmates, unintentionally, because maybe, I came to class not knowing half a word of Japanese except for writing 15 hiragana... [...] Yes, you can feel the pressure a lot.*  
*(Student D)*



Interestingly, student B describes this competitive atmosphere as a commonly understood aspect between students attending the Japanese curriculum, indicating that “everybody studying Japanese” is aware of it. Competition is thus portrayed as a collective experience shared among peers, potentially leading to discomfort but also motivation. When asked if this competition has somehow influenced her language learning, student B stated that

*It is some sort of pressure, but on the other hand it is a push  
to... let's say, deepen my knowledge, yes. (Student B).*

When directly asking why there is such a competitive atmosphere through a follow-up question, Student A attributes it to her own situation, particularly not living in Venice, which resulted in preformed student groups. She also suggests that this situation has hindered her ability to cooperate with her peers both in the classroom and during tutoring activities. Additionally, she speculates that tutoring sessions conducted in the classroom and not online might have enhanced cooperation.

In summary, three out of four interviewed students perceived a competitive atmosphere during their formal Japanese language learning at the university and associated it with a sense of pressure. This pressure, to some extent, has influenced the learners' possibility for cooperation and learning from each other, leading to a tendency toward individualisation and individualised learning. These dynamics can be partly attributed to the peculiar structural and institutional factors inherent to the case study, such as the significant number of ECTS and hours dedicated to the Japanese language, but also the authority of Ca' Foscari University for studying Japanese. The fact that Ca' Foscari offers the single Bachelor's programme with the most ECTS have probably contributed to a major level of language proficiency equated with its Japanese language courses, making it 'worth it' to purposefully move out of one's home in order to achieve a high level of Japanese proficiency and better employability. Additionally, a pressure to conform to a native speaker model, meaning aiming to obtain a native-like fluency,

can be also observed, which is reinforced through textbooks, classroom content and discourse inherent to fluency.

## 4.2 Discussion

Students demonstrated self-direction in their language learning process both before and after university, variously adopting learning strategies and tools not strictly suggested by an authority figure. However, this did not necessarily translate into a critical assessment of their learning environment or course content. Instead, autonomy was predominantly interpreted as a tool for efficiently retaining class content and studying individually, eventually even leading to competitive comparisons with peers.

In fact, although students continued to actively engage in informal learning alongside their formal education, learning outside the classroom content or the programme was undervalued and used primarily to meet institutional expectations, revealing a sense of dependency towards the institution and the authoritative figure of the teacher and the tutor. Hence, students have been found lacking a sense of self-awareness about both their autonomous skills and their decision-making processes. While they reported feeling confident when studying classroom content alone, they felt unsure and insecure about stepping outside their formal learning program and taking responsibility for their learning process.

This understanding of autonomy aligns with the widely accepted psychological aspect of autonomy, presented for example by Menegale (2011; 2014), and these results align with similar studies that analyse autonomy as a technical skill, as students prefer leaving the decision-making process to the teacher or another authoritative figure (Chan, Spratt, Humphreys, 2002). However, from a critical and transformative perspective, it is not possible to state that students' statements can be framed within a vision of autonomy as self-determination, (social) responsibility, and critical awareness (Raya&Vieira, 2021). From the perspective of empowerment, the interviewed students hinged on authority as a source of

validation and were found unable to co-construct meaning with others due to the structural creation of competition.

Interestingly, Benson (2013) states that constraining freedom and responsibility in the learning environment risks disrupting any sense of autonomy for the learner. Perhaps, the impossibility to freely choose study topics has thus prevented learners from attaining autonomy. Of course, students in this context already have the opportunity to ask to restudy a topic or seek to clarify their questions, but the fact that the interviewees would not prefer a more learner-centred approach leaves a series of questions unanswered. What would happen if learners could more actively participate in the decisional process of peer tutoring? More importantly, *do* they wish to take part in such a process? Tutors and educators can spend every session asking for their preferences, but what to do when students simply do not share their opinions?

When attempting to compare the results with other studies employing a dialogic approach to language learning, for instance Mariotti (2020b) notices both the success and ‘failure’ of a dialogic approach, as the majority of students reported a renewed interest in themselves and their peers, but a facilitator expressed a strong opinion which seemed to reinforce the language-nation-paradigm. In this case, however, the project developed through 15 weeks with no constraints in terms of content, employing Hosokawa, Mariotti and Ichishima’s (2022) pedagogical framework. Moreover, Alessandrini (2020), too, shares how some of the students attending classes employing a dialogic approach felt a sense of disapproval and deemed the course as ‘inadequate’, and preferred classes focused on drills and grammar-centred training. When referring to projects conducted outside the classroom and, for instance, applying the NoLBrick framework, the results vary, pointing out at the establishment of positive learning environments during online projects and a surge in motivation for their academic and life journey, an aspect individuated also by Ligabue (2021), who in his Master’s dissertation underlines the redistribution of power and responsibility between the members while also highlighting how the individual’s autonomy could contribute to the formation of “democratic

spaces". Scarfò (2022) also observes these positive results, but on the other hand points at the reproduction of power issues in a dialogic relationship within participants.

The online tools conceived to prompt learners to take the lead on their learning process like Jalea or CAFOSCARI Jisho, alongside activities aimed at actively looking for information disregarding of authority and critically assessing knowledge transmission practices, are some of the tools that can be employed for fostering autonomy and the empowerment of learners. However, since the interviewed students interpreted autonomous learning as *efficiently and independently* learning classroom content on their own in order to achieve valuable results in their institutional context, these tools are primarily used to align themselves with the programme.

Moreover, students showed a sense of dependency towards the tutor, the teacher, and the class content. As Alessandrini (2020) has already observed, this dependency can be interpreted as a shift from viewing the tutors as peers to seeing them as authority figures comparable to a teacher. This shift leads to expecting formal correction and a clear, structured schedule from the tutor. The results indicate that the tutor was not interpreted as a facilitator or a 'guide on the side' but had to essentially substitute the teacher. Interestingly, despite the tutor not being a teacher from both a strictly legislative and pedagogical perspective (Stigmar, 2016), students expected them to act as one, however closer in age. The tutor has been previously assigned the institutionally complementary role of fostering metacognitive competencies (such as reflection over one's learning) and assumption of responsibility and autonomy from an educational and occupational perspective (Torre, 2006). From this point of view, it can be argued that students partly misinterpret the tutor from both an institutional and a legislative point of view, as well as from the transformative framework adopted in this dissertation. How are these expectations created? Perhaps they stem from institutional needs, who require tutors to meet learners' needs? And how are these needs created and communicated to the institutional level? What is the influence of other involved stakeholders, such as employers and companies who require specific graduates? While these questions are

not the primary object of this study, they can however be considered an important variable in discussing students' sense of autonomy.

As mentioned in the analysis, tutoring activities were however generally appreciated by the students, who shared slightly different feedback about the service. One possible explanation about such different opinions can be based on a different perception by the students of this approach: probably, student D, on the one hand, may have positively evaluated the active learning approach because unsatisfied and uncomfortable with classroom learning, spontaneously expressing its enthusiasm for the activities. During the interview, he underlined that, as he felt discouraged and easily distracted when studying, actively engaging in retrieving information was fun and useful. Interestingly, student B and C, however the most critical of the autonomous retrieval activities, found tutoring sessions useful and, notably, constantly attended sessions throughout the semester. Student A expressed quite neutral opinions, stating that she appreciated the tutoring session with no particular critiques.

Concluding, students seemed to have built a relationship of trust with the tutor, as they expressed their opinion unfiltered during the interviews. What would their answer be if it was a teacher who asked for their opinions? This point, too, expresses the multifaceted nature of the tutor-tutee relationship.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this dissertation has hopefully shed light on the implications and challenges of promoting a critical and transformative approach to peer tutoring in language learning in Higher Education.

The present dissertation aimed at a) understanding the significance of promoting autonomy as a power-challenging pedagogical perspective and b) comprehending its implications from a praxis-driven perspective through the analysis of a peer tutoring case study grounded in a critical and transformative approach to language learning. This was conducted to gather insights into fostering students' critical awareness and reflective practice.

When attempting to answer the first question and frame the significance of critical and transformative approaches to language learning in Higher Education, this dissertation has initially pointed out at a body of literature that, often adopting a poststructural understanding of knowledge and knowledge transmission, urges to rethink education considering its political and potentially oppressive power. Therefore, the literature review emphasised the importance of fostering autonomous learning in language education as a means to challenge power-relations in the educational context and stimulate learners' awareness. Moving from a teacher-centred, standardised educational perspective, a critical and transformative approach argues for the significance of allowing learners the opportunity to question dominant perspectives (Mariotti, 2017).

The need for a more nuanced perspective on education is deemed especially necessary for the language education field. Teaching a language carries the risk of perpetuating essentialist views of ourselves and others, treating cultural differences as commodities (Holliday, 2018). Consequently, teachers may inadvertently reinforce the nation-language-culture paradigm to achieve expertise and recognition from a behaviouristic point of view, leading to what Billig (1995) calls "banal nationalism". For instance, Kumagai (2014) argues that language learning textbooks within Japanese as a FL often risk "enfranchising one group's cultural capital" (p. 201), and as such transmit stereotypical, normative and partial

constructions of a 'foreign culture'. This is where racist views of culture, languages and nations hide beyond notions of normativity, authenticity and universalism. The multicultural perspective in language education, as argued by Kubota&Lin (2009), has been often simply substituting the term 'race' with culture, differentiating between the Self and the Other based on stereotypes and images deriving from a colonialist past. Recent events, such as the surge in racism and violence during the COVID-19 crisis outlined by Miyake (2021), illustrate the impact of these images within the Italian context. Thus, as language can be interpreted as inherently culturally contested and constructed, language educators need to acknowledge their own conceptions and beliefs in order to not perpetuate racism and exclusion, eventually moving beyond a monolithic approach to both language and culture.

The interviews revealed that, within the specific context of the case study, students rely on authority and do not critically assess what they are being taught. This result urges us to reflect on what our pedagogical practices derive from a more nuanced perspective that goes beyond viewing education and knowledge transmission as 'neutral'. The relevance of promoting autonomous learning in higher education lies in challenging these assumptions and imposed power relations. In this specific context, fostering such reflection has the potential to allow learners to critically choose their standpoint in society and learning institutions, contributing to the larger task of forming "self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (Raya&Vieira, 2021, p. 84).

When specifically addressing peer tutoring practices and answering the second research question, it can be argued that peer tutoring, as a pedagogical practice that employs peers and is interpreted as activities addressing students' difficulties and uncertainties, has the potential to create a space for dialogue and reflection, as demonstrated by Bussu & Contini (2023). In practice, however, institutional structures and students' expectations play a critical role in shaping these pedagogical practices and can lead to the reproduction of authority and power relations. The case study has shown the difficulty students face in perceiving the need to take action and become agentive language learners due to their dependency on the

teacher/tutor, the programme, and the institution. The specific context of the case study, characterised by a high number of ECTS for the Japanese language and the presence of a normative and standardised model of language learning, has limited the effectiveness of peer tutoring as a pedagogical practice and have thus not allowed for the construction of a place for shared knowledge and co-responsibility.

Looking again at the results that emerged from these interviews (see Chapter 4, Paragraph 1, figure 9), the primary aspect that has been found relevant is the dependency of the student on the teacher/tutor, as well as on the broader institutional framework. Autonomy in language learning, which has been precedently interpreted (and criticised) as learning independently (Benson, 2013), here also assumes a multifaceted aspect: it both negates the social aspect of interdependence, as students could not cooperate, and it equates with efficiently retaining content driven by institutional directives. Students' expectations of a clear and structured study environment, which is essentially teacher-driven, influence their vision of autonomy as efficiently retaining knowledge and engaging in individualised learning. Depending on the teacher for clear guidance does not contribute to the assumption of responsibility as interpreted by Benson (2013), but also Freire (1970), as in this analysis students have been found to prefer not taking charge and thus reproduce hierarchical logics of knowledge transmission.

Hence, by observing the interviewees' responses to tutoring practices, which involved a unique power-relation between tutor and tutee, it can be stated that tutoring sessions alone, as institutional needs require them to strictly follow class contents, are not enough to stimulate students' awareness and critical thinking. As observed above, this can be attributed to the specific context and the reproduction of power dynamics and competition in peer-to-peer relationship. Comparing the results with previous studies in the same context (Mariotti, 2017; Alessandrini, 2020; Varone, 2021; Nishida, 2021), students' dependence and resistance to a critical and transformative approach can also be identified. The results are also consistent with studies that did not adopt a critical and transformative approach and instead applied a technical and psychological understanding of autonomy (Chan, Spratt, Humprehs, 2002).



However, the projects conducted by the NoLBrick research group reported a surge in motivation and cooperation among participants which was not observed in this case study. This difference may perhaps be attributed to the freedom of content selection during the aforementioned projects which was not attainable during the tutoring sessions analysed in this dissertation.

Moreover, although it has not been analysed in this dissertation, the tutors themselves are not exempt from the reproduction of hierarchical schemes during tutoring sessions. Moving away from a perspective that envisions a 'superior', more knowledgeable individual sharing their knowledge with another, 'inferior' individual means continuously questioning even the smallest interaction in the classroom. Therefore, this dissertation was not aimed at showing how an 'enlightened' tutor could 'help' tutees achieve 'empowerment', thus reproducing oppressive hierarchical schemes. On the contrary, it has strived to prove that there is a space for dialogue and the sharing of opinions in our pedagogical practices, between teacher and pupils, tutor and tutees, all in all members of the same society, disregarding of roles and deconstructing the ideologies that hinder the very possibility to engage in dialogue, as Alessandrini (2023) has pointed out.

Furthermore, assuming that a series of peer tutoring sessions could engage students in critically assessing what and why they learn might be a naive statement. As Varone (2021) observed, developing a sense of social responsibility and cognitive change are processes that may not happen in a short time and may not lead to immediate practical change. However, what may be perceived as naivety, I view as an ongoing endeavour to effect change, as in the imaginative side of critique. Critique and imagination exist in a dialectical relationship, as argued by Risager (2016), where one cannot exist without the other; besides recognising a situation we aim to address and potentially change (critique), we must also *imagine* alternatives and solutions. Yet, this challenge faces numerous, embedded challenges, which may lead us to acknowledge that critical approaches to language learning are difficult to translate in practice. How to concretely and effectively apply critical and transformative pedagogies in today's massified and bureaucratized higher education?

While this dissertation may not aspire to answer these crucial questions within empirical evidence, as others have already done (see, for instance, McArthur, 2010; Diaz, 2013), further research could additionally explore ethnographic perspectives of tutoring and reflect specifically on tutor formation within a critical approach to language learning, as, to the best of my knowledge, similar studies remain relatively limited and marginal (see Avis & Bathmaker, 2004; Avis, Bathmaker, Kendal & Parsons, 2003; Godbee, Ozias, Tang, 2015; Bara, Samada, 2023).

Realising our position in society, from both privileged and unprivileged perspectives, is crucial for fostering our awareness and understanding of the world. The challenge lies in introducing a 'critical' approach, as in engaging in sceptical worldviews about the dominant and the widely accepted, for those who "have not had the experience of being Othered" (Luke, 2004), or who may not be fully aware of experiencing subalternity. The interviews' results have thus highlighted the need to carefully consider pedagogical choices and policies as they can play a crucial role in shaping competition based on neoliberal assumptions of efficiency, competency and individualisation, as well as "modernistic hierarchical linear teaching-learning" (Mariotti, 2020c, p. 259). Reconsidering such pedagogical choices that foster competition may contribute to a lack of sensitivity towards societal issues and struggles, especially considering the recent past, furthering social fractures within our communities, where the younger generation, for instance, is still facing discrimination and oppression from various perspectives (Moore et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to promote pedagogical practices that, even though co-existing with bureaucratic and institutional barriers, strive to stimulate a nuanced view of our society and foster citizenship formation.

A more nuanced understanding of our society can only happen through continuous engagement, commitment and dialogue. Education can play a pivotal role in motivating to contribute to a more equitable society, while also enhancing intercultural comprehension from a 'liquid' and transnational perspective (Dasli, Diaz, 2016). Eventually, this may allow for the discovery of our own values and beliefs unfiltered by "blocking grand narratives" (Holliday, 2018) that often imply reproduction of superiority and inferiority.

Hence, enhancing our sensitivity to diversity and discrimination is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is nonetheless deemed important in the commitment by both educators and learners in creating a space for sharing knowledge and redistributing power if we believe that our actions can have an impact. This impact, rather than being driven by well-intended yet essentialist visions of creating an equal world through simplistic notions of culture and language, becomes intimate and personal when we start recognising ourselves as actors whose actions carry consequences and meaning. It is deeply connected with reconnecting with our identities and values, “seeking to find ourselves within the cultural lives of others” (Holliday, 2018, p. 47). I believe that committing ourselves to continuously engage and reflect on our thoughts and actions is essential for shaping our identity and the meaning we wish to impart to our actions. Although this might not suffice as an answer to the aforementioned questions, my hope is that what has emerged from this dissertation will stimulate others to rethink their stance and positionality.

Having personally experienced a similar situation as the interviewees did as a student some years ago, it has been extremely interesting to observe the recurrence of similar patterns concerning students’ perceptions and aptitudes. What struck me was the sense of inadequacy felt by one of the students. Following the prescriptive can be comfortable, as it is clear and linear, but it does not come to terms with our individuality, and it can potentially make anyone feel ‘wrong’ or ‘off-track’. Normativity and standards provide reassurance by presenting us with structures and predictability. However, living into the ‘standard’ as a student has made me feel undervalued many times and made me consider my value as strictly connected to academic success, and only taking part in dialogical classes within the NoLBrick framework I understood that I, too, have a voice, and that that voice has a value and can influence (and be influenced by) others.

Perhaps, if the role of Higher Education can still be attributed to nourishing minds and creating spaces for “dialogue and exchange between diverse communities, and to train active citizenship” (Bussu&Contini, 2023, p. 114), it could be insightful to consider making students

deal with uncertainty and unpredictability, as argued by Hosokawa (2000), to prepare to a future that, from my perspective, does not look so 'clear' and 'linear'.

While I do not think that any of this is or should be interpreted as a prescriptive way of experiencing education, as far as I have ascertained during these years of training and observation, I may not have been the only one who was intrigued by this vision as a student. Ultimately, it can be stated that it is up to each student and each instructor to make choices, be it reproducing or questioning the given.

As Mariotti (2017), quoting Gramsci (1932), states, every action is political. Thus, reenvisioning education means first of all starting questioning ourselves and our own behaviours.

## 5.1 Limitations & Implications

It should be acknowledged that the purposefulness and the small size of the sampling, together with the focus on a single case study, may be viewed as possible limitations to the generalizability and objectivity of the findings.

Additionally, my insider status within the context of the case study may have inadvertently introduced bias and preconceived notions into the analysis. As a former student, I also experienced a high level of competition with my peers, resulting in my experience being quite similar to that of the interviewed students. In this regard, this potential source of bias has been mitigated through a constant process of inquiry and a proper methodological approach.

Furthermore, the decision to analyse the interviews and not use fieldwork notes or participatory observation, employing an action research approach (Coonan, 2000), may have limited the perspective of the study, as it resulted in disregarding the tutor's experience and impressions. As stated in Chapter 3, this choice was made for ethical reasons, but it may still be seen as a possible limitation. Moreover, the institutional role of the tutor required tutoring practices to focus primarily on reviewing class contents and materials, thus leaving little room for alternative topics.

In order to address these limitations, future research could consider analysing a similar case study through an action research approach to better understand the pedagogical implications of a similar situation and provide clear instructions for practitioners. Further research might investigate a larger sample size and possibly apply a quantitative approach to analyse a broader framework with a larger number of participants. Additionally, exploring situations where class content is not mandatory while applying a critical and transformative framework to peer tutoring for language learning could lead to different results in terms of fostering collaboration and a sense of social responsibility.

It would be particularly interesting to further explore the aspect of tutor formation: previous literature (Da Re, 2012; Bonelli, Da Re, 2018) has already underlined the importance of properly forming tutors to engage with students. Perhaps, organising frequent workshops or discussion forums with tutors and the faculty staff could foster discussion and articulate new ideas and proposals.

Moreover, it may also be important to allow the possibility to co-manage tutoring directly with tutees. As the previously mentioned literature has demonstrated, these aspects are critical for fostering learner's autonomy and might be a useful alternative for educators when considering applying peer tutoring to language learning classes. Creating welcoming spaces that make students feel comfortable enough to express themselves and participate in the learning process is, from my point of view, especially important.

It should be noted that all these efforts have already been employed by the case study's context, and that what has been mentioned above are suggestions based on the present analysis, but of course time and resource constraints can play a critical role in hindering many initiatives.



# Appendix

## Part 1

1. Age (year of birth)
2. Have you studied Japanese before university?
  - a. If yes, for how many years?
    - i. Where?
    - ii. How have you studied it?
    - iii. Describe a typical Japanese language lesson in high school or with a private teacher.
    - iv. In particular, what tools have you employed? How much time have you spent studying the language on your own, and how much with a teacher? How did you study the language without the teacher? Can you provide some practical examples of how you organised your study sessions?
  - b. If not, have you ever studied any other language?
    - i. Where?
    - ii. How have you studied it?
    - iii. Describe a typical language lesson in high school or with a private teacher.
    - iv. In particular, what tools have you employed? How much time have you spent studying the language on your own, and how much with a teacher? How did you study the language without the teacher? Can you provide some practical examples of how you organised your study sessions?
3. Have you started university later than September? If yes, when?
4. Are you attending Japanese language classes?
  - a. If yes, which partition?

5. If you are attending Japanese language classes, tell me about your experience.
  - a. Have you noticed any differences between your formal language learning experience before and during university?

## Part 2

6. Tell me about your experience in the Japanese language tutoring sessions.
  - a. What were your expectations?
  - b. What is your opinion on the service?
  - c. What do you think about the worksheet activities?
7. Tell me in detail how you study the language outside the classroom. Is there anything different compared to before entering university?
  - a. How do you feel when studying alone?
  - b. What do you concretely do? E.g., how do you use both university materials and supplementary tools (websites, videos, etc.)
8. Do you conduct any other activities outside the classroom related to the Japanese language besides the assigned homework? (Chan, Spratt, Humphreys, 2002).
  - a. E.g. non-mandatory assignments, reading additional books, listening to music, watching films and tv series, studying topics unrelated to the course, social networks.
9. If you have the opportunity to study without a teacher, how good do you think you would be at choosing learning activities, objectives and materials outside the classroom? (ibidem)
10. Would you feel capable of studying topics related to the Japanese language autonomously? Are you already doing it? Would you provide an example of how you would organise your studying sessions right now?
11. Do you feel empowered to contribute to important decisions and influence your learning process and that of others?



12. After attending tutoring sessions, has anything changed in your awareness about your autonomy in learning Japanese?
13. Do you think you have developed a sense of autonomy from this type of activity?
14. In conclusion, do you feel more autonomous than before university? How would you rate yourself from one to five?

### Part 3

15. Do you use Jalea and CAFOSCARI Jisho?
  - a. If not, have you ever tried to use them? What was your experience? What other language learning tools do you use, and why?
  - b. If yes, what are your thoughts about them? What is your experience? Do you use any other language learning tool, and why?
16. How often do you use these tools?
17. Do you find these tools a valid support for studying without the teacher or the tutor?
18. Do you think that these tools have helped you become more autonomous?

### Part 4

19. Describe your ideal tutoring service.
  - a. Prompts: in-person or online? What kind of activities?
20. Cooperation.
  - a. Prompts: did you cooperate with your peers during tutoring? Why? Why not?
21. Motivation.
  - a. Prompts: why did you attend tutoring sessions?

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