

## Activity Report

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# Decolonising the curriculum in Japanese language education in the UK and Europe

英国およびヨーロッパの日本語教育におけるカリキュラムの脱植民地化の実態

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**Abstract:** In recent years, “Decolonising the Curriculum (DtC)” has been widely discussed and advocated in the European educational landscape as part of inclusive education. However, few examples of its practice in Japanese language teaching have been reported. While discussions of DtC in Japan often focus on the context of Japan’s former colonies, this context does not apply to Japanese language education in Europe, where Japanese is positioned as a minority language, thus a target for inclusion. Considering these complex contexts, we conducted a survey of Japanese teachers to understand the position and goal of DtC for Japanese language education in Europe. This report primarily investigates how Japanese language teachers in Europe perceive and implement the concept of decolonisation in their teaching. The project highlighted the complexity of DtC within Japanese language education in the UK and Europe, where both the perspectives of the coloniser and the colonised are present. Our findings revealed a range of practices for reviewing power dynamics in the classroom to make education more inclusive, whether respondents intended DtC or not; there were different ways of understanding DtC. We hope that this initiative will provide an

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opportunity for further discussion of DtC in the teaching of languages other than English.

**Keywords:** decolonising the curriculum; inclusive education; language teaching; Eurocentrism; Japan-centrism; linguistic justice

## 1 Introduction: description of context, aims and objectives

The concept of “Decolonising the Curriculum” (DtC) has gained significant attention in British and European higher education institutions, often framed within broader discussions of diversity and inclusion. According to Winter et al. (2022), decolonisation has become a socio-political movement aimed at critiquing colonial legacies and challenging Eurocentric power structures. Decolonisation has also extended to language studies, resulting in what Phipps (2021: 5) describes as “power dynamics” that have resulted in “the predominance of certain languages over others”. Despite the growing body of literature on DtC in language education, including works by Lin and Martin (2005), Macedo (2019), Phipps (2019, 2021), Institute of Modern Languages Research (2020), Makoni et al. (2022), and Hird (2023), Japanese language education remains notably underexplored in this context.

For Japanese language teachers in the UK and Europe, DtC discussions can often feel distant or unrelatable. It is not uncommon for educators to express uncertainty about the relevance of these debates to their teaching context or the expectations associated with DtC implementation (Cinaglia and De Costa 2022; Neville 2023). Moreover, the implications of decolonisation in Japanese language education may vary significantly depending on the learners’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For instance, when teaching Japanese to students from China or other East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, the colonial history of Japan as a regional power might place Japanese language in a position of dominance (Yasuda 2019). Conversely, in the context of English-speaking countries like the UK, Japanese is often perceived as a minority or marginalised language (University Council of Modern Languages and Association of University Language Communities in the UK & Ireland 2021). This duality complicates the narrative of decolonisation, sometimes making it feel as though the language is being repositioned within a framework that imposes its own form of colonial identity as a “minority language.”

These complexities prompt a critical question: What does decolonising the curriculum mean for non-European languages like Japanese, particularly in the UK and European educational contexts? To date, only a handful of studies have addressed this issue. For example, Tomatsuri (2022) explored practices of decolonisation and inclusion

in Japanese language and translation teaching, and the British Association for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (BATJ) adopted “Decolonising Language Education” as a conference theme in 2022, with Sato-Rossberg (2023) as the keynote speaker. However, beyond these limited examples, little has been reported or discussed. Whether this reflects a lack of implementation or insufficient documentation remains unclear.

Given this gap, this study aims to investigate the current state of Japanese language education in the UK and Europe with respect to decolonisation. Specifically, it seeks to understand how Japanese language teachers perceive and engage with DtC, if at all, and to explore how these perspectives contribute to the broader conversation about inclusive language education. By addressing these questions, this study hopes to deepen the understanding of what DtC means for Japanese language teaching and offer insights into its potential for fostering a more inclusive curriculum.

## 2 Account of activity: data collection and analysis

### 2.1 Methodology

An online questionnaire was conducted between April and May 2024 and circulated to Japanese language teachers and researchers in the field via the mailing lists of the British Association for Teaching Japanese Language as a Foreign Language (BATJ), Japanese Language Education UK (JLE-UK) e-discussion group for teachers of Japanese, the British Association for Japanese Studies (BAJS), the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS), and the Association of Japanese Language Teachers in Europe (AJE). The responses were coded to identify trends and perceptions of “Decolonising the Curriculum” (DtC).

In July and August 2024, semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted with selected respondents from the UK and Europe who had provided practical examples in their questionnaire responses. These interviews delved deeper into teachers’ thoughts and practices, with a focus on daily considerations and activities that appeared to relate to DtC.

Both the questionnaires and interviews were conducted in Japanese. All quoted comments have been translated by the authors.

The analysis focused on selecting the most relevant questions from the questionnaire that yielded significant results. From the follow-up interviews, specific cases that highlighted emerging trends were identified and examined in greater detail to deepen the analysis.

## 2.2 Awareness and perceptions of decolonising the curriculum (DtC)

The survey results revealed significant variations in awareness of DtC. Among Higher education respondents, 77 % reported familiarity with the concept, compared to only 35 % in non-higher education (e.g. primary and secondary schools, language schools, adult education and private tutors) contexts (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

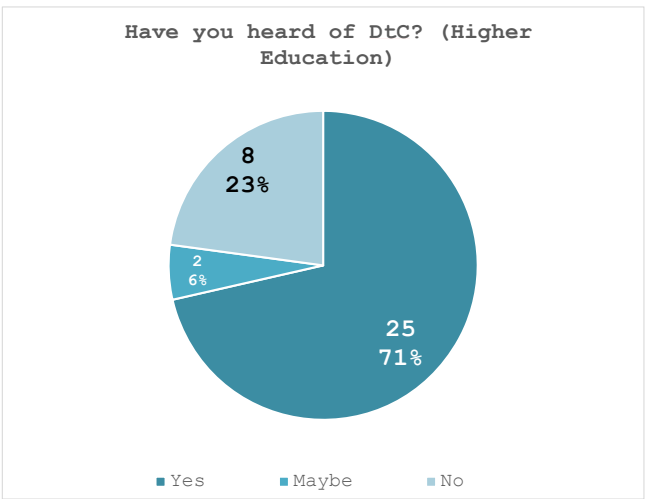
This disparity was even more pronounced when comparing familiarity levels in the UK versus Europe. Overall, we can observe, understanding of DtC remained inconsistent, with only 39 % of teachers who were familiar with the term feeling confident in their understanding of it (Figure 2).

Forty-two teachers applied DtC through four key lenses, highlighting diverse perspectives on its application:

### 1. Addressing power imbalances

This lens focused on moving away from Eurocentrism by reducing English-language centrism and diversifying teaching materials.

*Example:* One teacher used world maps with Japan at the centre during lessons to challenge Western-centric perspectives. This reflects an effort to foster critical thinking about global perspectives, a key aim of DtC.



**Figure 1.1:** Have you heard of DtC? (HE in the UK & Europe) (N = 35).

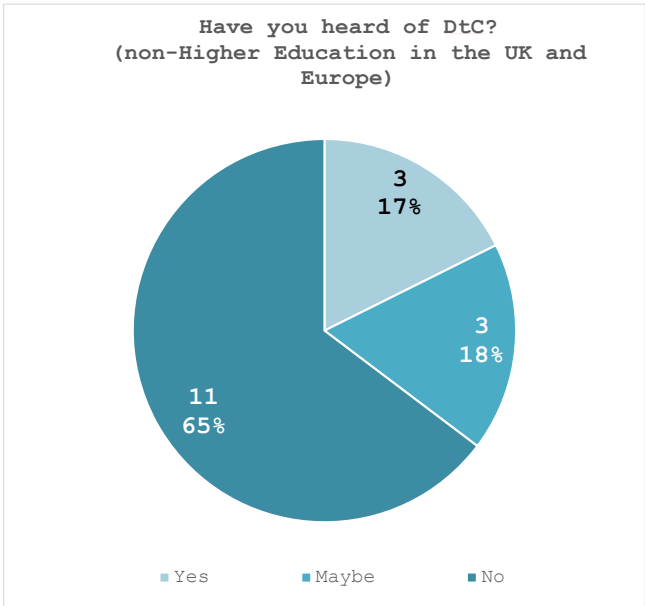


Figure 1.2: Have you heard of DtC? (Non-HE in UK & Europe) (N = 17).

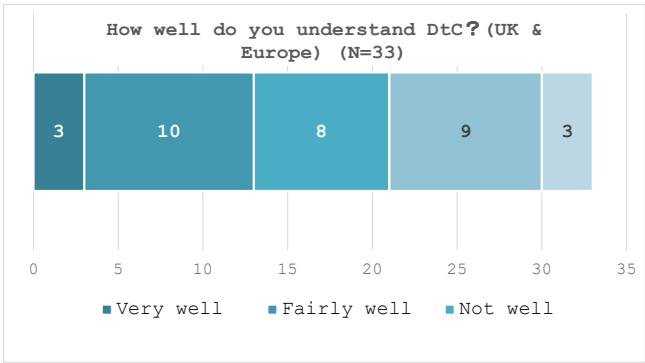


Figure 2: How well do you understand DtC? (UK & Europe) (N = 33).

2. Reinterpreting historical narratives

Eleven teachers aimed to foster a more balanced understanding of history. Among them, two teachers encouraged critical examination of dominant narratives and perspectives from the past.

*Example:* These two teachers engaged students in critical discussions on how dominant perspectives shape historical narratives, examining topics like Japan's imperial history, social hierarchies, language biases, and national identity, fostering awareness of power dynamics in history.

### 3. Reframing colonised curricula

Six respondents, particularly those less familiar with DtC, associated the concept with reforming colonised countries' curricula, which diverges from DtC's broader aims of challenging existing power structures.

### 4. Student-centred curricula

Flexibility and autonomy in curriculum design were seen as crucial for adapting to specific institutional or learner needs.

*Example:* A higher education instructor fostered student autonomy by designing assessments that integrated students' year-abroad experiences, enabling them to explore linguistic diversity and apply sociolinguistic concepts to practical tasks.

These interpretations underscore the variety of ways teachers perceive DtC but also reveal significant gaps in shared understanding, which presents challenges for implementation.

## 2.3 Challenges in understanding and implementing DtC in Japanese language education

While the survey highlighted awareness of DtC, respondents identified three main obstacles to its understanding and application. Of the 55 respondents, 18 explained the reasons why DtC is difficult to understand:

### 1. Ambiguity of the term and its aims

Seven respondents were unclear about whether DtC involves incorporating “decolonisation” as a topic into the curriculum or fundamentally redesigning the curriculum itself.

*Example:* As one respondent noted,

(前略)「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」となると、「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」となると、(中略)カリキュラムの中に「脱植民地化」のトピックをいれることなのか、カリキュラムを脱植民地化することなのかともわかりません。[...] When it comes to “DtC”, [...] I am not even sure whether it means including “decolonisation” as a topic in the curriculum or actually DtC itself.]

2. Overlap with other concepts

Two teachers reported confusion between DtC and related ideas such as cultural diversity, inclusivity, or anti-racism, leading to uncertainty about the distinct goals of DtC.

3. Japan’s dual identity in Europe

Four teachers grappled with Japan’s complex position as former coloniser in Asia while Japanese simultaneously being a minority language in Europe.

*Example:* A respondent shared,

英国における日本語教育の現場で、「どこ」が「どこから」脱する必要があるのかという前提がうまくイメージできていません。 [In the context of Japanese language teaching in the UK, I cannot clearly imagine “what” needs to “decolonise” “from where”.]

These challenges suggest that while awareness of DtC is growing, practical and theoretical ambiguities hinder widespread adoption and understanding.

3 Practical applications and strategies in classrooms

Despite these challenges, 52 % of respondents familiar with DtC reported implementing related practices (Figure 3). These efforts often fell into two overarching themes:

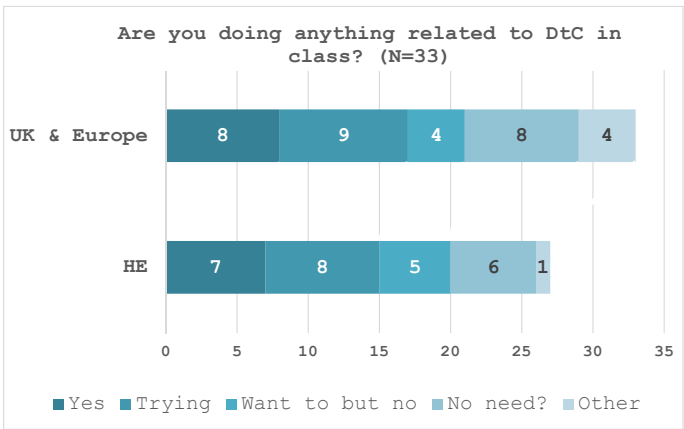


Figure 3: Are you doing anything related to DtC in class? (N = 33).

### 3.1 Moving beyond Eurocentrism

Nine teachers sought to reduce Eurocentric biases and stereotypes, often revising teaching materials and challenging students' assumptions:

*Example 1:* One teacher observed that students viewed Japanese culture as “exotic” or equated it with “indigenous South American tribes.” To counter this, they emphasised relatable and nuanced portrayals of Japanese culture, helping students critically examine such stereotypes.

*Example 2:* Teachers critiqued and proposed to revise textbook scenarios, replacing depictions of white businessmen interacting with Japanese locals with representations that better reflected the realities of cross-cultural communication.

### 3.2 Reducing Japan-centrism

Another common focus was addressing the dominance of “standard” Japanese and encouraging recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity within Japan:

*Example 1:* One educator implemented “Decolonisation This Week” sessions, introducing regional dialects and role language to foster a broader understanding of Japan's linguistic landscape.

*Example 2:* One teacher overseeing a year-abroad programme encouraged students to research and reflect on local dialects, fostering autonomy and engagement with diverse cultural contexts.

These practices demonstrate how some teachers are actively navigating DtC's principles despite its challenges. However, the limited scope of these efforts also highlights barriers to broader implementation. For example, institutional constraints, lack of training, and insufficient resources were commonly cited as obstacles. These gaps indicate a need for greater institutional support and clearer guidelines for integrating DtC into Japanese language education.

## 4 Summary of results and future prospects

This study examined the perspectives and practices of Japanese language teachers in the UK and Europe in relation to “Decolonising the Curriculum” (DtC). Drawing on questionnaire and interview data, the findings revealed that awareness of DtC is more pronounced among teachers in the UK, with 77 % of Higher Education respondents indicating familiarity, compared to 35 % in non-Higher Education contexts. Among the 77 %, there is significant diversity in how teachers interpret and apply the concept in their teaching.

Many teachers expressed limited confidence in their understanding of DtC, often citing unclear terminology and challenges in adapting it to Japanese language education. A key point of tension lies in whether DtC should primarily address Eurocentrism, Japan-centrism, or both. Complicating these discussions further is Japan's dual identity – both as a former colonising power in Asia and as a marginalised, “minority” culture in the European context. This duality poses unique challenges in aligning Japanese language education with DtC principles.

In terms of practice, teachers in Higher Education were more likely to engage with DtC, incorporating strategies such as diversifying teaching materials, addressing cultural biases, and challenging “native speakerism.” Efforts to reduce Japan-centrism included expanding beyond the standardised notion of “correct” Japanese to embrace regional dialects and fostering critical discussions about Japan's colonial history. Nevertheless, few practices explicitly addressed the complexities of teaching Japanese as a minority language in a Eurocentric educational framework, highlighting a gap in the broader DtC discourse.

Teachers also reported feeling excluded from institutional DtC efforts, which they perceived as being dominated by Eurocentric narratives. While many recognised the need to adopt alternative perspectives, they expressed caution about unintentionally reinforcing new cultural biases. One significant observation was the marginalisation of Japanese culture, with some students perceiving it as distant or exotic, often equating it with “otherness.” This phenomenon underscores the need for nuanced approaches to fostering cultural inclusivity.

These findings highlight the complexity of applying DtC principles to Japanese language education. For meaningful progress, a dual focus is needed to deconstruct both Japan-centrism and Eurocentrism. Teachers must navigate Japan's unique historical and cultural position while fostering inclusive, student-centred curricula that challenge dominant narratives without imposing new biases.

To address these challenges, several recommendations emerge. Japanese language educators should actively engage in DtC discussions, bringing their unique perspectives to broader debates on language education. Curricula should be revisited to transcend the limitations of Western pedagogical frameworks, addressing specific power dynamics and cultural contexts relevant to Japanese language teaching. Documenting and sharing practical examples of DtC-aligned practices from Japanese language classrooms can help foster collaboration across disciplines and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of decolonisation in language education.

Based on these findings, teachers must critically examine the authority embedded in teacher-student relationships, promoting inclusive pedagogy that values diverse cultural perspectives. Institutions should also expand opportunities to learn less-taught languages like Japanese, which can enhance exposure to cultural diversity and reduce biases. By creating more equitable learning environments,

Japanese language education in the UK and Europe can better contribute to the broader goals of decolonisation and inclusivity, addressing its unique challenges and fostering meaningful change.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Translation of the text of the excerpt from the questionnaire

日本語教育における「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」についてのアンケート

[Questionnaire on “Decolonising the Curriculum” in Japanese Language Education]

1. 居住地:お住まいはどちらですか。(国名でお答えください) [Residence: Where do you live? (Please indicate your country)]
2. 所属機関の属性(複数回答可) [Institutional affiliation (multiple answers allowed)]
3. あなたは「カリキュラムの脱植民地化(Decolonising the Curriculum)」について聞いたことがありますか。[Have you heard about “Decolonising the Curriculum”?]
4. 機関に所属している方にお聞きします。あなたの機関では「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」ということについて、よく話題になりますか。[We ask you if you are a member of an institution. Is the “decolonisation of the curriculum” a frequent topic of conversation at your institution?]
5. 「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」について、自分はどのくらいよく理解できていると思いますか。[How well do you think you understand the “decolonisation of the curriculum”?]
6. どのようなところがわかりにくいと思いますか。[What do you think is difficult to understand?]
7. 日本語教育にとらわれず、教育全般において「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」と聞いたとき、どのようなことを思い浮かべますか。[What do you think of when you hear the phrase “decolonisation of the curriculum,” not only in Japanese language education but in education in general?]
8. 日本語教育の文脈では「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」と聞いたとき、どのようなことを思い浮かべますか。[In the context of Japanese language education, what do you think of when you hear the phrase “decolonisation of the curriculum”?]
9. ご自分が担当する授業で具体的に何かしていますか。[Are you doing anything specific in the classes you teach?]

10. 日本語教育にとらわれず、教育全般において「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」と聞いたとき、どのようなことを思い浮かべますか。[What do you think of when you hear the phrase “decolonisation of the curriculum,” not only in the context of Japanese language education, but in education in general?]
11. 日本語教育の文脈では「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」と聞いたとき、どのようなことを思い浮かべますか。[In the context of Japanese language education, what do you think of when you hear the phrase “decolonisation of the curriculum”?]

## Appendix 2: Translation of the text of interview questions

### 1. 脱植民地化の重要性 [Importance of Decolonisation]

現在お住まいの国で日本語教育に関わっている中で、「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」は重要だと思いますか [Do you think “decolonising the curriculum” is important in the context of Japanese language education in your current country of residence?]

### 2. カリキュラムの脱植民地化の実践 [Implementing the Decolonisation of the Curriculum]

カリキュラムの脱植民地化を進めていくために、(職場等で)何か行われている・行っていますか。[To promote the decolonisation of the curriculum, are there any initiatives currently being undertaken (in your workplace or by you etc.)?]

### 3. 実践の効果 [Effectiveness of Practice]

実際に授業で「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」を取り入れたことで、期待していた効果・改善点等が見受けられましたか。[Have you observed expected effects or improvements from integrating “decolonising the curriculum” in your classes?]

### 4. カリキュラムの脱植民地化について議論する [Discussing the Decolonisation of the Curriculum]

カリキュラムの脱植民地化について、誰かと話し合ったことがありますか。[Have you ever discussed the decolonisation of the curriculum with anyone?]

### 5. 将来の方向性 [Future Direction]

今教えていらっしゃる国の「カリキュラムの脱植民地化」に関係する現在の状況、またこれから向かっていくであろうと思われる方向性の中で、ご自身の日本語教育での実践として、どんなことを、どのように、していきたいと思っておられますか。また、その実践の実現・継続にあたり、サポートが必要であると思われる場合、誰からの、どのようなサポートを望まれますか。[In the context of the current situation and future direction of “decolonising

the curriculum” in the country where you are currently teaching, what do you want to do and how in your Japanese language education practice? Also, if you think you need support for the realisation or continuation of that practice, what kind of support would you like and from whom?]

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