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Competence and the Support Methods of the Child with Foreign Connection in Gray Zone Explored from the Japanese Language Ability and Psychological Tests: Case study based on DLA, KABC-II, and P-F studies

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1. Research Background and Objectives

In recent years, the number of students with foreign connection in Japanese schools has risen sharply. While the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is formulating policies and local regions are developing support systems, a serious challenge has emerged in the handling of so-called “gray zone” children. It is often difficult to determine whether these children's academic struggles stem from a lack of Japanese language proficiency, issues with academic aptitude (cognitive ability), or developmental disabilities. There are multiple instances in which children are transferred to special needs classes without a clear understanding of the underlying cause, raising concerns about the risk of them failing to receive appropriate educational support.

In particular, when existing standardized psychological tests are applied directly to children with foreign connection, numerous problems are apt to arise, such as linguistic and cultural bias, a mismatch with the standardization sample, and reduced reliability when tests are administered via an interpreter. To address these pressing needs and challenges in clinical and educational settings, this study was conducted as an attempt to bridge expertise in Japanese language education and psychology. By combining a variety of tests and numerous interviews into an integrated assessment, it aimed to elucidate the true nature of the potential of “gray zone” children and the challenges they face, and to propose concrete steps to ensure their support.

2. Integrated Research Methodology

The participant in this study was a nine-year-old third-grade girl whose native language is Chinese; she had been identified in the school setting as a “gray zone” child with insufficiently developed cognitive abilities.

Spanning the fields of Japanese language education and psychology—and taking the differences between them into account—this study explored the causes and nature of the issues faced

by the child through an integrated assessment comprising three types of tests: Japanese language proficiency tests, intelligence tests, and personality tests.

Carefully considering the limitations of psychological tests, we constructed and administered a composite test battery combining the following three assessments:

(1) DLA (JSL Interactive Assessment): Dynamically measuring latent Japanese proficiency (conversational fluency, discrete linguistic skills, and academic language proficiency) through dialogue.

(2) KABC-II (Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children II): An intelligence test designed with multicultural children. It measures Cognitive Scale (sequential, simultaneous, planning, and learning) reflecting cognitive function, and Learning Scale (vocabulary, reading, writing, and math) reflecting basic academic skills. In this study, a bilingual assessment approach was attempted; in addition to standard administration in Japanese, certain subtests were administered in the child's native language (Chinese) via an interpreter.

(3) P-F Study (Picture Frustration Study): A personality test was used to assess psychological stress, behavioral tendencies, and personality traits.

In addition, the results were refined by conducting thorough interviews with school nurses (special needs coordinators), homeroom teachers, and teachers in charge of international classrooms, both before and after testing, and by cross-referencing everyday observational data with the various test results.

During the analysis, overlapping test items between the two fields were reconciled, and the theoretical relationships among academic ability, language proficiency, cognitive function, and personality were further refined.

3. Characteristics and Key Results of the Study

The most notable achievement of this study was the exploration of latent Japanese proficiency and the comparative analysis of psychological test results obtained in both Japanese and the native language (Chinese). The study succeeded in revealing latent abilities and bottlenecks in Japanese language processing that were hidden beneath the surface and not apparent through casual observation.

Linguistic Assessment Results

Regarding the DLA, the overall assessment indicated that the child could catch up with sufficient effort, suggesting that her latent potential was not being fully realized. It was concluded that providing specific praise and helping to build confidence would be effective support strategies to solidify her motivation for learning. Analysis of DLA results and daily observations revealed that the child, being fluent in conversational Japanese, employed communication strategies, such as changing the subject or avoidance behaviors, which produced a misleading appearance of understanding. It

became evident that the child was driven into a psychological state where, despite feeling anxious about falling behind in class due to limited vocabulary and a lack of proficiency in academic language, she could not bring herself to ask questions or admit that she did not understand; instead, she felt compelled to retreat to the school infirmary (an escape behavior) to save face.

Psychological Assessment Results

When the KABC-II was administered in Japanese using standard procedures, the score on the subtest measuring short-term memory was extremely low—six years below the child's chronological age. However, when the same test was administered in the child's native language (Chinese), the score rose to three years above her chronological age. This discrepancy cannot be attributed to practice effects from retesting; rather, it demonstrates significant difficulty in retaining and processing auditory stimuli in Japanese. Similarly, on subtests measuring vocabulary and conceptual understanding, the child performed at a level approximately six years below her chronological age in Japanese, whereas she performed at a level commensurate with her age in her native language. When the data from both languages were factored into the overall KABC-II standard scores, the Cognitive scale improved significantly from 82 to 92, and the Vocabulary scale rose from 53 to 81; the Nonverbal scale score was 96. These results ruled out developmental disorders or cognitive deficits, demonstrating that the child possesses the potential to achieve adequate academic proficiency.

Results from the P-F Study showed high scores for patience and assertion; while the child was obedient to instructions from adults—such as parents and teachers—she tended to exhibit strong wariness and an adversarial attitude toward peers. Although this behavior might initially appear to indicate social isolation or maladjustment, the findings suggest that cultural behavioral norms and upbringing in her home country (China) likely played a significant role. It appears that a combination of psychological factors, such as a lack of confidence and low self-esteem, and an inherently strong-willed nature had a negative impact, creating a mindset where the child sought to hide her lack of understanding from others.

4. Implications for Educational Support and Future Prospects

Based on the findings of this study, the following specific educational support model was proposed to the school for implementation, including these educational implications: 1) Academic ability must be understood through its interaction with cognitive function, Japanese language proficiency, and personality. 2) Support should be provided in the child's native language, leveraging her stronger language, based on the Common Underlying Proficiency model (Cummins, 1980). 3) Frequent, attentive encouragement during support sessions helps solidify learning motivation. 4) It is crucial to recognize where the child is struggling without being misled by superficial attempts to mask difficulties or by stopgap strategies. 5) The child should be encouraged to reflect on her own understanding and identify exactly what is unclear; the importance of asking questions of teachers and support staff should be emphasized. 6) Since cognitive function characteristics vary among children, support must be tailored to each child's specific profile. For the child who participated in this study,

and who demonstrated high scores on the Successive Processing scale, effective strategies included presenting study steps concretely and sequentially, providing verbal explanations rather than relying on diagrams, and collaboratively creating a study plan. 7) Regarding issues of cross-cultural interaction, the child's individuality and culture should be respected and valued, while peers should be helped to understand the child's unique personality and the challenges she faces. It is also beneficial to explain standard interpersonal communication behaviors among Japanese children of the same age and to provide opportunities for the child to consider how to deepen her interactions with others. 8) Beyond direct support for the child, parents and school staff should share an understanding of the child's high aptitude alongside the difficulties she faces in using Japanese; together, they should plan ways to leverage the child's strengths and create an environment that supports her future development.

Following the implementation of this assessment, school reported that the discussions and uncertainty among teachers about whether to transfer her to a special needs class had been resolved. While the assessment successfully alleviated teacher anxiety and provided a clear support strategy, the need to secure personnel capable of implementing specific support methods emerged as a new challenge. Moving forward, the aim is to construct a comprehensive support model that encompasses individual cognitive strategies and psychological aspects, while also establishing the necessary environment and accumulating data to ensure that assessment results are effectively integrated into daily instructional practices at the school.

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