Plurilingual education and pedagogical plurilanguaging in an elementary school in Japan: A perspectival origami for better learning

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Abstract

In this article, we examine a plurilingual practice in Japan – a country traditionally described as being extremely monolingual. The contribution explores innovative teaching that disrupts monolingual ideologies and how we view TESOL practice. The context of the study is a public elementary school situated in western Japan. We follow the classes of one teacher to discuss her use of pedagogical plurilanguaging as intentional instructional strategies that integrate several languages and cultural viewpoints to support the development of language and content learning, plurilingual awareness and multiperspectivity. We explain how we think it echoes with, and differs from, the concept of translanguaging. Data sources include audio and video recordings of classroom interactions, visual documentation, researchers’ field-notes, teachers’ and learners’ reflective journaling, as well as learners’ productions. The study has implications for teacher training and curriculum design and resituates the teaching of English as a world language in a more complex and multifaceted way.
Keywords: plurilanguaging; translanguaging; plurilingual education; elementary education; Japan; foreign language education.

1 Introduction

A very large number of works in recent years have focused on the study of plurilingualism and plurilingual education in the classroom (Grommes and Hu, 2014; Lau and Van Viegen, 2020; May, 2014; Piccardo and Capron Puozzo, 2015, among others). Much fewer studies have researched plurilingual pedagogical approaches in educational contexts where plurilingualism is not regarded as a feature of the learning community, nor as a sociopolitical and educational goal in wider society. A small number of studies have used the lens of plurilingualism and trans-plurilanguaging to analyse teachers’ practice and beliefs in the context of second language instruction in ordinary classrooms in Japan (Kano, 2016), although the inclusion of multiple languages in the learning process is still considered controversial, as mainstream language educators continue to believe in the importance of language separation (Aoyama, 2020; Oyama, Candelier and Nishiyama, 2014).

Plurilingual education has been an increasingly widespread form of education in Europe and elsewhere in the world, predominantly in countries that view themselves as highly multilingual. It is much less common to see it discussed, and implemented, in a context such as the one we just briefly described. When plurilingual education is implemented, studies point out that pedagogical strategies used by teachers are limited because the materials and resources they use are often imported, notably from France (Oyama, 2019). Nevertheless, these teachers participate in Japan’s effort to reform its English curriculum across levels of instruction and implement new teaching practices in order to improve learners’ English language proficiency and intercultural competence. For example, Vollmer and Thanyawatpokin (2019) describe how plurilingual principles have been infused in various English classrooms in the country, and they offer insights into why and how students should be afforded opportunities to rely on multiple language varieties and allowed to navigate different languages in ways that facilitate communication. Oyama (2019) and Oyama and Pearce (2019) analyse the impact of plurilingual pedagogies and how language awareness activities enhance learners’ experience and can contribute to transforming their perceptions of plurilingualism and language learning. Nevertheless, these authors consistently point to the fact that teachers in the Japanese context are usually unprepared to implement such practice, and that teacher training is insufficiently geared towards plurilingualism in the country (Ishikawa, 2020; Moore et al., 2020).
Against this general background, this article sets out to capture innovative pedagogical strategies that engage learners in (pluri)languaging, here defined as navigating and braiding language(s) and semiotic resources, displacing perspectives (which includes coordinating beliefs) and developing an awareness of the ‘other,’ and of relationships between two or more people’s epistemic states for learning. These unfolding/folding moments in the classroom describe, for us, the complex dynamics that interlink process and competence. In this sense, the use of the origami metaphor to describe plurilingual education in the Japanese context aims to capture the complexities of meaning-making, of being aware of and attentive to multiple perspectives and what is visible and what is not. Origami (折り紙), the art of folding paper into geometric shapes and figures, is a complex process learnt and practised by Japanese children as early as in kindergarten. To fold origami, one must have an understanding of spaces, shapes and volume, mathematics and geometry. An origami is constructed (folded) from a thing that already exists and transforms into something else, the folds revealing and highlighting certain facets while making others invisible. One chooses the type of paper, the colour schemes and textures. Origami can be combined and braided together (such as the thousand paper cranes, 千羽鶴 senbazuru that sometimes adorn temples).

The context of the study is a public elementary school situated in western Japan. We follow the classes of one teacher (one of the co-authors here) to discuss her use of pedagogical plurilanguaging (we borrow the term from Lüdi, 2015) as intentional instructional strategies that integrate several languages and cultural viewpoints to support the development of language and content learning, plurilingual awareness and multiperspectivity. In this paper, we first provide some background to foreign language education and the traditional TESOL teaching applied in Japan. We then explore plurilingual education and the concept of plurilanguaging with reference to the unique nature of the Japanese language, before examining how our co-author applies these in her practice. Finally, through examples of practice we discuss the potential of plurilingual approaches in Japanese schools as an alternative to traditional TESOL pedagogical approaches.

2 Background

2.1 Foreign language education in Japan

Before examining the particular classroom ecology and practice in this paper, it is necessary to briefly consider the context of public foreign language education. Japan has previously been described as being characterised by double monolingualism, that is, Japanese is the language for domestic communication,
and English is seen as the only useful international language (Oyama and Pearce, 2019).

Japan boasts a wealth of dialects that vary considerably from region to region. In addition, though either endangered or close to extinct, there are a number of minority languages including Ainu and several Ryukyuan languages. Similarly, while the immigrant communities represent a small numerical minority, they display considerable linguistic diversity. For instance, the most represented family languages amongst children who require Japanese language support at elementary schools are Portuguese, Chinese, Tagalog, Spanish and Vietnamese (MEXT, 2017a). These languages have traditionally not been given recognition in school curricula, as English has been prioritised as a foreign language.

Historically, the focus on English has primarily been driven by entrance examinations. As an entrance exam subject, and due to the intense competition for prized high school and university spots, English has solidified itself as a de facto compulsory subject in secondary education (Terasawa, 2014). Secondary school English education has therefore typically focused on accurate production of linguistic form and been taught through a variant of the grammar translation method of traditional TESOL teaching (Gorsuch, 2001). Elementary schools, where foreign language was made a compulsory core subject for 5th and 6th grades in 2020, are not bound by the pressure of entrance examinations (public junior high schools do not implement them), and are thus free to include a greater plurality in lessons. The goal of foreign language education, as stated in the Course of Study, is ‘through understanding of how communication in foreign languages works, to develop … the foundational qualities and abilities necessary to attempt communication’ (MEXT, 2017b:156). While there is ambiguity in what foundational qualities the Course of Study refers to, the subject is clearly not intended to be simply secondary-level English classes brought forward to elementary schools. However, due to various factors including an emphasis on English in policy and teacher training, as well as the fact that the majority of elementary school practitioners have themselves experienced only exam-oriented English language teaching, most teachers avoid the inclusion of languages other than English (Oyama and Pearce, 2019). This may also be in part due to a focus on productive skills in teacher training (Asaoka, 2019), rather than on the underlying (plurilingual) competences that foreign language education can seek to develop.

It can be said that foreign language (primarily English) education in Japan remains bound by the discourse of mainstream TESOL, specifically the linguistic-cognitive view, which regards language as both homogeneous and static; isolated knowledge to be acquired, divorced from the realities of actual use. In the linguistic-cognitive view, the target language is viewed as that used by the
ideal, monolingual native-speaker, and other languages are considered to be interferences that only serve to get in the way of acquiring the target language. Under this view, the language use of bilinguals, including behaviours such as codeswitching, or more complex phenomena, sometimes labelled translanguaging, are problematic because they challenge the authoritative nature of the language to be learned (and by extension, the ‘owners’ of that language – monolingual native speakers and TESOL researchers and practitioners). While this view has been criticised in the broader literature of applied linguistics and language learning (see, for instance, the sociocultural debate started by Firth and Wagner, 1997, or Vivian Cook’s work on multicompetence, such as Cook and Li Wei, 2016), ‘SLA and TESOL … continue to treat bi/multilingualism as a form of individual aberration and bi/multilingual learners as deficient in relation to monolinguals’ (May, 2014:20). However, as Vivian Cook and Braj Kachru (e.g., Cook, 1999; Kachru, 1981) have been arguing for the last few decades, this treatment of bi-/multilinguals as aberrations is the result of a fundamental fallacy that has plagued SLA research and TESOL in particular.

In other contexts, more inclusive approaches to pedagogy, such as translanguaging and plurilingual education, have arisen in opposition to the monolingual bias of mainstream (typically English) foreign language education. While these concepts have begun to enter the academic discourse in Japan (Aoyama, 2020; Kano, 2016), they remain almost unknown at the policy level or in school practice. These concepts will be explored in the next section.

2.2 Beyond the monolingual bias: Plurilingual education and pedagogical plurilanguaging

Plurilingual education is an a posteriori umbrella term that regroups and describes a set of practices, values and beliefs about language education (Beacco and Coste, 2017). It is common to refer to plurilingual education in reference to the work of the Council of Europe and its educational politics, often analysed as neoliberal and utilitarian, and embodied through the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a ‘fit for all’ tool to describe proficiency that can be applied to any context (see, for example, Castellotti and Nishiyama 2011). The pedagogies, in fact, largely predate the CEFR, and while we admit it is certainly arbitrary to collapse them under one umbrella, it would be restrictive to think such pedagogical strategies can only be valid in contexts of high language and cultural contacts, or in addressing the need to revitalise and protect heritage and immigrant languages, or to simply resist the overwhelming globalisation of English.

Plurilingual education, as we understand it in this paper, is anchored in a view that emphasises the fluid and socially constructed nature of language
boundaries, and focuses on the linguistic repertoires of individuals, how they shift with time and experience, and how users deploy them (or not) in communicative contexts in ways that do not necessarily conform to social language boundaries (Coste, Moore and Zarate, 2009 [1997]; Lüdi and Py, 2009; Moore and Gajo, 2009). A plurilingual view in education emphasises the interconnectivity among languages (Lüdi and Py, 2009) and proposes more complex interweavings where languages are not conceptualised as separate but as integrated entities (Grosjean, 1992; Lüdi, 2020). This holistic view not only disrupts the still deeply rooted language ideologies of nativeness and language mastery; it posits that (i) learners can (better) engage in problem-solving and knowledge construction when they can dip into their entire repertoire of semiotic resources (material, social, cultural) for meaning-making, and that (ii) this can potentially be better achieved through navigating several languages, and languaging in a plurilingual mode. This is because these languaging navigations can potentially create affordance spaces for imbalance and ambivalence, estrangement, cooperation and coordination, (plurilingual) awareness and the development of criticality through perspective taking (Gajo, 2007; Moore and Gajo, 2009; Piccardo, 2018; among many). Old and new concepts have tried to coin and capture those learning dynamics. We focus on two recent ones, the concept of translanguaging, which has already gained momentum in scholarly discussion, in regard to the concept of plurilanguaging, to discuss its theoretical motivations and the possible value it adds to the conversation.

In a recent article, Cenoz and Gorter (2020), expanding on a definition given by García and Li Wei (2014), provide a useful, localising, definition of translanguaging:

Translanguaging is considered to be different from code-switching and code-mixing because it is not just a shift between languages but ‘the speakers’ construction and use of original and complex interrelated discursive practices’ (García and Li Wei, 2014:22). (Cenoz and Gorter, 2020:300)

Cenoz and Gorter point out that didactic alternation between (or artificial separation of) languages is both abandoned and heavily criticised by translanguaging advocates who, while pointing this out, too readily forget that the notion was initially developed in an effort to support learning at schools through a macro, meso and micro weaving of languages through the curriculum, through the classroom’s lessons and through learning interactions (Castellotti and Moore, 1997; Martin-Jones, 1995; Moore, 2002). Didactic alternation in the classroom has therefore been discussed and implemented for decades, in various educational contexts, and with different goals and purposes. This body of classroom research was precisely inspired by the work of
sociolinguists who have made it possible to reinvest the ordinary practice of bi-/multilinguals (plurilinguals) as fundamentally rich, original, complex, polyglossic and polyphonic, and of such a nature as to foster conceptual development and learning in schools (Darbelley et al., 2014; Jessner, 2006; Lin, 2017, 2020; Milroy and Muysken, 1995; Simon, 2001). The concept of translanguaging has greatly contributed to the questioning of many normative assumptions prevalent in schools, such as the belief that languages are separate entities and should be kept strictly separate in the classroom, and that learning a language means acquiring its vocabulary and grammar, with an ultimate goal of mastering it ‘like a native speaker.’ As a theoretical concept, translanguaging embraces the ‘multimodal social semiotic view that linguistic signs are part of a wider repertoire of modal resources that sign makers have at their disposal and that carry particular socio-historical and political associations’ (Li Wei, 2018:22).

For our part, we prefer the concept of plurilanguaging borrowed from Lüdi (2015), which allows us to continue to situate ourselves within a plurilingual posture, and to fit into a certain history of ideas, as succinctly described above (see also Lau and Van Viegen, 2020). The two concepts have different socio-political groundings, a difference that has contributed to carving divergent paths in educational practice. But beyond epistemological divergences and their sociocultural landscapes of emergence, the languaging practices they point out highlight continua of practices enacted by educators, and the educational benefits teachers believe they can achieve when they engage in plurilingual pedagogies in their classroom (Choi and Ollerhead, 2017). The use of the hyphen to which we sometimes resort (trans-plurilanguaging) allows us to highlight the resonance of the two concepts, while indicating that they do not exactly cover in the same way how we look at the dynamics of these phenomena. For example, for us, the trans- in languaging emphasises fluidity and passage, the disruption of boundaries (including spatial and temporal) and the transformation of identities. The pluri- insists more, from our point of view, on how the pluralisation (of languages, modes, viewpoints) per se forges creative spaces for reflective learning (see also Piccardo, 2018). It emphasises the way teachers and learners articulate language/multilingual resources in collaborative formats and negotiate opacity (problematic aspects in understandings that might otherwise go unnoticed) to co-construct meaning and build up knowledge. Gajo and Serra (2002) describe opacity as a key learning moment because it triggers the awareness that clarification and coordination of viewpoints are necessary to conceptualise new knowledge (to participate in those negotiations, children need to understand the perspective of others, as well as their own), thus also increasing (plurilingual) awareness, explanatory behaviour and problem-solving (Gillies and Haynes, 2011). For us, perspective
taking is achieved through reflective practice and awareness/consciousness. All forms involving a practice of plurality, where learners are encouraged to record and reflect on their experience with language/(languaging) and learning, are equally important (we mean that consciousness is not limited to metalinguistic awareness, but also awareness of cultural perspectives, elaborated upon at the end of this section).

As a language, Japanese may lend itself to plurilanguaging/multiperspectivity, given the hybrid nature of the language itself, whose writing system includes multiple syllabaries, ideograms and several different romanisations. Japanese has been in close contact with China since ancient times, and adopted Chinese characters for its own use. Kanji (漢字) are ideograms that express meaning in their own right. Alongside the characters, the Chinese sounds used at the time were also imported (called on-yomi), although the Japanese language did not treat them simply as foreign loan words, but also applied Japanese phonetic readings to the characters (called kun-yomi). For instance, the kanji character for water (水, see also Figure 1) has the on-yomi 'sui', but also denotes the Japanese word for water, ‘mizu.’

In this sense, kanji as used in Japanese differs greatly from loanwords in, say, Indo-European languages (Suzuki, 2017). The Japanese imported characters that represented concepts from a foreign language (pre-5th century Chinese), and applied the Japanese phonetic representations of those concepts to the characters in a feat of linguistic acrobatics. To give an example, even if one knows the word ‘hydrogen’ in English, and the physical element it represents, one would not necessarily know that it consists of the parts ‘hydro’ (water) and ‘-gen’ (element), without being taught. In Japanese, the two characters 水 and 素 combine to form 水素 (literally, ‘the material of water’, see Figure 1), the meaning of which even an elementary school student could grasp (due to their knowledge of the two kanji, part of the elementary school curriculum, and the accompanying kun-yomi). In contrast, you cannot write ‘water’ in English and read it as ‘aqua’ or ‘hydro,’ nor could you read aqua or hydro as ‘water.’ In Japanese, however, this correspondence is found across all basic concepts due to the use of on-yomi and kun-yomi for kanji ideograms.4

This peculiar mixed nature of Japanese has been most well documented by the linguist Takao Suzuki, but is not a perspective that has become common sense amongst laymen speakers of Japanese, and thus, speakers of the language are not necessarily aware of this. At a first glance, engaging with the Japanese language appears to be a form of ‘translanguaging,’ due to the use of a rich Chinese-derived vocabulary. As speakers typically do this unconsciously, however, they are not automatically engaging in plurilanguaging, although the potential exists in the visual representations of kanji for pedagogical plurilanguaging practice.
Visual representations can help trigger and express prior knowledge and facilitate reflection on learning. Tang, Delgado and Moje (2014) further argue that learners need to be exposed to both multiple and multimodal representations as they offer different possibilities for representing knowledge, insisting on the interactions of action, gesture and image in the learning process (Kress et al., 2011).

In this sense, plurilanguaging anchors languaging as both a multimodal and multisensory practice, and as a process of knowledge construction that goes beyond language(s). Coming back to our origami metaphor, plurilanguaging, in relation to learning, points out where negotiation and perspective-taking need to take place (it unfolds the folds). Plurilanguaging offers the possibility of using and enacting an expanded range of semiotic resources and semiotic assemblages (Pennycook, 2017) as mediators in the construction of meaning (which transforms into something else). Plurilanguaging supports and nourishes the cross-fertilisation and hybridisation of concepts that is achieved through learning through several languages and from multiple cultural perspectives (Darbelley et al., 2014; Gajo, 2007) and braiding them in creative ways (Piccardo, 2018) (it highlights what is new under the folds). In this sense, the concept of plurilanguaging articulates, in pedagogical terms, the need to include the entire repertoire of learners’ resources (including their beliefs and practices), the development of language-specific proficiency in named languages (the mandate of the school) and the use of these resources for learning (building disciplinary knowledge). Pedagogical plurilanguaging, as defined here, is not then restricted to language learning, nor is it a unique feature of plurilingual individuals. Plurilanguaging in this view embodies a stance
(i.e., lens or point of view) and a reflective posture or posturing⁵ (as a way of being and thinking); it is a way of experiencing language(s) and knowledge, and therefore can also be practised, embodied and lived within one named language only.

### 3 Methodology and participants

The participants in this study include one of the co-authors, elementary school teacher Yuki Kitano (Yuki-sensei), one 3rd-grade class (n = 37, 19 boys and 18 girls), and one 4th-grade class (n = 35, 18 boys and 17 girls). The practice in the 3rd grade was a Japanese subject class, and in the 4th grade, a Foreign Language Activities class. The 3rd-grade students had previously experienced 10 hours of foreign language classes, and the 4th-grade, 27 hours.

The multimodal data collected include visual documentation of the classroom ecology, audio and video recordings of classroom’s interactions, researchers’ field-notes, teachers’ and learners’ reflective journalling and learners’ productions. As the focus of this study is primarily on plurilingual practice in English teaching, analyses will centre on visual documentation, fieldnotes and a semistructured reflective interview with Yuki-sensei.

Analysis of the data was collaborative, and comprised interpretations by all of the authors, each of whom has a different background and perspective; a Japanese practitioner teaching languages and other disciplines in Japanese and English, and the three researchers: another Japanese author speaking French, a French author speaking English and a New Zealander speaking Japanese. Questions raised and conclusions drawn were an amalgamation of the analytical process as well as the writing, conducted by the authors in several languages, and the negotiating of the authors’ ideas and interpretations that this diversity necessitated.

### 4 Analyses

In this section, we will examine the class ecology of Yuki-sensei (ゆき先生). We will examine how both her classroom environment and teaching practices have been devised to foster multiperspectivity, not only in how knowledge is constructed, but also through multimodal and plurilingual experiential practices that engage students in language and nurture a plurilingual posture.

#### 4.1 The classroom ecology

First, let us take a look at the classroom environment that Yuki-sensei has created. In stark contrast to the double monolingualism mentioned above,
Yuki-sensei’s language classroom is intensely multilingual/multicultural. The classroom is filled with books in a variety of languages (see Figure 2). These materials are chosen with great care to demonstrate the variety of languages in the world, and to break down the notion of one nation, one language, such as the idea that only English is spoken in areas usually identified as English-speaking (the United States, for instance). In Figure 2, we see for example the book series *First Thousand Words* (by Heather Amery, with illustrations by Stephen Cartwright, 2014), displayed against the wall and the world map, in three languages – German, French and Spanish – as well as an encyclopaedia of world writing systems, which includes representations of writing systems in the Japanese *katakana* syllabary (Shoji, 2015).

![Figure 2. Picture of the linguistic landscape of the classroom](image)

Several of the materials highlight the presence of indigenous languages, such as the example in Figure 3, a page from the book *Hello Atlas* by Ben Handicott and Kenard Pak (2016). *Hello Atlas* presents greetings and expressions in more than 130 languages, with access to online audio recordings by speakers of those languages. Maps in this book show the names of languages in English and in the language (and occasionally the script) concerned, and include both well-known and rarer languages, languages imported during colonisation (such as French/Français in Canada) and indigenous languages, such as Ojibwe/Anishinaabemowin, Inuktitut/ᐃᓄᒃᑎᑐᑦ, spoken in Northern Quebec and Nunavut (Canadian Eastern North), or Cherokee/Tsalagi Gawonihisdi (which also uses a syllabary not shown here, ᏣᎳᎩᎦᏬᏂᎯᏍᏗ).

For the children, entering Yuki-sensei’s class means entering a multilingual and multicultural environment. For instance, you can see dolls representing children from various parts of the world that children can play with (see Figure 2, second photo from left). This part of the classroom’s arrangement is inspired by Yuki-sensei’s own experiences with interactive exhibitions at museums and her fascination with them. The fact that the children’s journals on their experiential engagement with languages are situated centrally within this display demonstrates that the children’s experiences are directly connected with this wider world.
4.2 Learning with a plurilingual stance

What is important about these resources is that they are not simply decorative. For instance, a multilingual calendar stands out on the teacher’s desk (Figure 4). At the beginning of every foreign language lesson, Yuki-sensei enlarges the calendar on the OCR. For each week of this calendar, flags, buildings, cultural titbits, foods, country names, their languages and main greetings are prominently displayed. On a day near the end of March in which the other three co-authors visited Yuki-sensei’s classroom, the country of the week was Cameroon, and the French language was introduced. In this class, as usual, she had all of the students read the foreign language greetings aloud. A phonetic representation of each greeting/expression is provided in the Japanese katakana syllabary in the green speech bubbles, with the meaning in Japanese above and the spelling in French below. Yuki-sensei notes that reading the foreign words from the katakana representations is cumbersome for adults, but the children enjoy it immensely (retrospective feedback, April 2020). Yuki-sensei also does not fail to capitalise on opportunities for the children to put their language into practice – when the first author, Danièle, visited the classroom, Yuki-sensei encouraged her to give a greeting in French, to which the students replied, also in French, enthusiastically. It was purely coincidental that the language on the calendar that day was French, although here Yuki-sensei did not just have them read the expressions aloud, but through a brief interaction with Danièle, showed the children that they could be used in real interaction. The students were also ready to respond to them, a potential demonstration of an emerging plurilingual posture. Yuki-sensei also takes care to write the country of the week on a post-it note which she attaches to the world
map shown in Figure 2, so that the children have an idea of where the country is geographically located.

Other materials on display in the classroom, including books such as *Alphabet City*, are also incorporated in lessons in a manner that allows children to engage experientially with language, through a variety of modalities.

![Figure 4. The classroom’s multilingual calendar](image)

Here we would like to examine two instances of practice, both of which, remarkably, took place on the same day, for which all of the authors were present. Both revolve around the Roman alphabet, and include either the aforementioned resources from the classroom, or elements of the linguistic landscape of the students’ daily lives.

4.2.1 *Alphabet City*. The first practice was in a foreign language class for 4th-grade students, and was multimodal, combining both language instruction
(the Roman alphabet, specifically lower case letters as used in the English language) with art. In this practice, Yuki-sensei drew on one of the books she had on display in the classroom: Stephen T. Johnson’s *Alphabet City* (1996). This is an interesting book; a collection of paintings based on photos of miscellanea from around New York City that resemble the letters A to Z in the alphabet (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Page of *Alphabet City* by Johnson, 1996](image)

Based upon this book, which Yuki-sensei first showed to the students, the activity was to create original characters from letters of the Roman alphabet, and ascribe attributes and personalities to them. Before beginning the task, Yuki-sensei provided an impromptu example on the blackboard, an elephant character using the letter ‘U’ (see Figure 6). She named her character Uzou-san, which, borrowing the phonetics for the name of the character ‘U,’ was read Yuzou, a common name among older men in Japan. For the children, however, this Yuzou was novel – first, it used the Roman character ‘U,’ and second, it was also a pun, as zou (象) in Japanese means ‘elephant.’ Neither of these characters is commonly used in Japanese personal names. In the interview with Yuki-sensei, she remarked that many children make the connection between the shape of the letter ‘U’ and elephants – an idea which she had actually borrowed from students in previous years.
In Japanese texts, at least the texts used at schools, Roman characters are not typically mixed with Japanese. In the context of Yuki-sensei’s classroom, however, such plurisemiotisation is very natural, and directly linked to students’ learning. Referring back to Figure 6, this plurisemiotisation is employed expertly by Yuki-sensei, who uses *udon* and *umeboshi,* words that are typically written in the Japanese syllabary. In Japan, the Roman alphabet is reserved for foreign words, or to give something a new or fashionable appeal (names for buildings, companies) or for public signage (such as subway station names). In Yuki-sensei’s class, she deviates from this norm by using the Roman alphabet to transliterate what is usually written using the Japanese syllabary. In this way, she creates an opportunity for students to engage in plurilanguaging with the Roman alphabet within Japanese – the alphabet can be used to represent everyday, personal objects that the children interact with (this connection is drawn again in the second practice, below). There is no artificial separation of the semiotic resources that the children have at their disposal.
Some of the characters that the students created are shown in Figure 7. One character specifically drew the attention of the researchers – a globe, written around the letter ‘K’ (Figure 8). During discussions of photos taken by the researchers during the practice, the lead author, Danièle wondered if it might be a map of Japan. This was not readily apparent, but she thought if turned on its side it might resemble the geography of Japan. We wondered together whether this might be a result of a curious map on display in the classroom – of Japan on its side, a quite unusual representation (see also Figure 8). We thought it might be an influence of the decentring and multiperspectivity afforded by the unique classroom ecology. When the second author, Mayo, thought to ask Yuki-sensei about this in the interview, she provided some extra information (for instance, the map is centred on the Japanese prefecture of Toyama) and mentioned that the particular child had quite a unique sensibility. Whether Yuki-sensei’s multiperspectival classroom ecology was directly tied to this artistic expression is unclear but it is nevertheless an interesting observation.

Taking *Alphabet City* as a starting point, a book in which the author found letters in objects around the city, Yuki-sensei flipped the author’s process, and had the children begin with letters, from which they would develop characters. In this way, the children engaged in learning activities centred around a single object (letters of the Roman alphabet), while shifting their perspectives. That is the essentially plurilingual nature of the activity; the students created their own unique characters out of the Roman letters, which were then shared with the class as the children came to the front of the classroom, and put their characters together to spell out words. This potentially fosters a sense of authorship, being the students’ own characters, and also multiperspectivity, as multiple students bring their individual characters together to form new words.
4.2.2 Morigutisi or Moriguchishi? The second practice was in a Japanese class for 3rd-grade students, and is revealing of a type of pre-existing plurality in the romanisation of the Japanese language. As Roman characters were not designed to represent Japanese phonology, several methods of romanisation have arisen, with the two major varieties being Hepburn (ヘボン式) romanisation (commonly used on signs and in passports, etc.), and kunreishiki (訓令式), less centred on English phonology, and used in Japanese textbooks.

As the latter type of romanisation, kunreishiki, is what is employed in textbooks, it is this type that is typically taught first to Japanese learners, and has historically been their first experience of the Roman alphabet. However, much of the romanisation that is actually experienced in Japan, employed on signage and such, is of the Hepburn type. Yuki-sensei saw this as a unique opportunity to both demonstrate to her students, experientially, the constraints of writing systems, as well as to provide an opportunity to engage in plurilanguaging with realia from their local environment. To this end, she introduced the image shown in Figure 9, a picture taken of a sign at a station very close to Yuki-sensei’s school, and one that the students would be familiar with.

During this lesson, the children were instructed to write their names, and the name of the local station in kunreishiki roman characters, which resulted in the romanisation, Morigutisi. Serendipitously, the name of the local station includes two Japanese characters (ち and し), which are romanised in two different ways. The child in Figure 9 has been asked to come up to the blackboard, and to point out the differences between what he had written and the sign. Finally, Yuki-sensei helped the learners draw the connection between the English-reader oriented Hepburn romanisations on the signs and the phonics instruction she regularly includes in English foreign language lessons.

Even in this relatively simple activity, we can see Yuki-sensei’s attention to detail, the connections she draws between different subjects, and the opportunities for plurilanguaging that her lessons offer. Firstly, her lesson here helps
the children to connect the knowledge they have learned in Japanese classes (*kunreishiki* romanisation) with foreign language (the English phonics, and the representation of English phonology through Hepburn romanisation), perhaps demonstrating to the children that knowledge acquired in one language can be applied to understanding and meaning-making in others.

The simple act of including signage from a local station, and having the students thoroughly engage with it by comparing it against what they had produced themselves, offers an opportunity to engage with the characters from different perspectives. Initially from a Japanese-oriented perspective (writing the name of their city in *kunreishiki*); and then, from an English-oriented perspective, when engaging with the Hepburn romanisation on the signs. This opportunity was in part afforded by the unique nature of the Japanese language with its plurality in writing systems and of romanisations. By capitalising on this plurality, and on the local linguistic landscape, however, Yuki-sensei delivers a much richer, plurilingual lesson than what might have been achieved through romanisation drills alone. The examples here have shown how Yuki-sensei uses every learning moment for the pluralisation of languages, modes and viewpoints to forge creative spaces for reflective learning in which learners navigate multilingual and polysemiotic resources to negotiate meaning and construct knowledge.

5 Concluding remarks

A reading of macro-level language education policy in Japan may instil in a reader the idea that practice is restricted to the rigid teaching of English only, within a tradition of (double) monolingualism. But stepping into the classroom, we see a variety of practice enacted. What we could observe here is that macro-level policy documents are not the sole determiners of classroom practice. Teachers’ epistemologies of practice, their values, beliefs and philosophies, anchored, filtered and formed (in the manner of the origami) through professional experiences, are thus inevitably transformative.

In this article, we focused on classroom moments (García and Kleyn, 2016) when the teacher and her students engaged in weaving, in multiple ways, language(s) and viewpoints for learning. We discussed several examples that exemplified how plurilingual practice and plurilanguaging could create spaces where learners could engage with creativity, critical reflection; could be self-aware, notice and pay attention; could use and transfer all their semiotic resources and could construct an ‘experience’ of language(s) conducive to an ‘experience’ of the other, and of otherness. In this sense, the plurilingual and multiperspectival stance on knowledge production and meaning-making that Yuki-sensei adopted in her classroom probes into understandings
of (intercultural) awareness as both reflective and experiential, and fully inte-
gerated in core education in order to foster a particular posture, or *postur-
ing*, towards plurality and diversity through language and crossdisciplinary
learning.

Throughout this paper we have unfolded the origami of Yuki-sensei’s prac-
tice to reveal some of what was hidden behind or between the folds. In practice,
it is a kaleidoscopic view on learning that is reflected in the teacher’s and the
children’s constant shifting of perspectives, and that takes the crafted shape
of the origami – a transformative approach to learning.

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**Notes**

1 Japan has the smallest percentage of immigrants in the OECD.
2 Seventy hours per year in which students are evaluated on performance. This replaced the
former Foreign Language Activities subject (外国語活動), a non-evaluated subject of 35 hours
per year, that was first introduced nationwide in 2011. Foreign Language Activities are now con-
ducted in the 3rd and 4th grades.
A top-down curriculum document produced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that all schools must adhere to.

Another aspect of plurality in Japanese, concerning romanisation of the language, is touched upon in Section 4.2.2.

The term posture (16th century) is derived from the French (1588), itself derived from the Italian postura, posto (to pose), and from Latin positura (position, station), from postulus/ponere (to put, to place). It thus indicates a particular attitude of the body (a position), as well as a capacity (to place oneself in a spatial/mindful location). It can also be understood as a person’s situation (in relation to opinion).

Words are divided into themes including ‘At Home,’ ‘Actions,’ ‘Food’ and ‘Colours.’ Readers can listen to each word read by a speaker of each language at the Usborne Quicklinks website. The books exist in a number of languages, including Arabic, Portuguese, Polish, Italian, Hebrew, Russian, Chinese and Japanese.

Udon (うどん) is a type of noodle, and umeboshi (梅干し) a pickled Japanese plum. Both are very traditional Japanese foods which the children are very familiar with.

Romanisation of Japanese was taught at elementary schools before the introduction of foreign languages and is typically still a component of Japanese language education.

In fact, signage in Japanese stations and public spaces is English, not simply romanised Japanese. One humorous example is a well-known street in Kyoto called 東大路通, which is translated on signposts as Higashi ojidori st. This literal meaning of the name has the word street repeated three times – twice in Japanese (oji in ancient Japanese, dori in modern Japanese, and street in English).

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