

Rethinking Japanese Language Education: Plurilingual Pedagogy in Canadian Post-Secondary Classrooms

日本語教育の再考：カナダの高等教育における複言語教育

Mingqi Zhang, Simon Fraser University
章銘棋, サイモンフレーザー大学

1. Introduction

As Canadian university classrooms grow more diverse, linguistic and cultural diversity has become central in language education (Lory, 2021). Yet many institutions still privilege dominant languages, often viewing plurilingual learners as deficient rather than recognizing their full linguistic repertoires (Marshall et al., 2019). Plurilingual pedagogy, which encourages flexible and integrated language use, has gained ground in English and European education (Piccardo et al., 2021). However, it has had little impact on Japanese language teaching, which remains shaped by traditional ideologies.

Japanese language programs were historically designed for monolingual first-language English speakers. In the U.S., this trend is well documented (Mori, 2023), and Canadian programs developed under similar assumptions. However, students from Asian backgrounds now often constitute the majority in many Japanese language classrooms (Duff, 2024; Mori, 2023), yet their existing linguistic knowledge is frequently overlooked. As Mori (2023) notes, Japanese language classrooms have the potential to become inclusive communities where plurilingual learners draw on their diverse language backgrounds, and monolingual learners benefit from engaging with those perspectives.

This conceptual paper explores how plurilingual pedagogy can enhance Japanese language education in Canada and discusses practical strategies that can be applied in Japanese classrooms.

2. Why Choose Plurilingualism Over Multilingualism and Translanguaging

In discussions of linguistic diversity in education, the terms multilingualism, plurilingualism, and translanguaging often arise. While used interchangeably in practice, they reflect different theoretical orientations (Moore & Bernaus, 2021). This section explains how plurilingualism differs from the other two and why it is especially relevant to Japanese language education in Canadian universities.

2.1 Multilingualism vs. Plurilingualism

Multilingualism and plurilingualism reflect two different orientations toward language use and education. Multilingualism typically refers to the coexistence of multiple languages within a society or among individuals, often treating each language as a separate, autonomous system. In contrast, plurilingualism focuses on the individual's ability to draw flexibly from an integrated and evolving linguistic repertoire (Piccardo et al., 2021).

In practice, a multilingual classroom may consist of students who speak different first languages, yet these languages are often excluded from instruction. A plurilingual classroom, however, intentionally incorporates learners' diverse linguistic resources to support

communication, learning, and intercultural understanding (Piccardo et al., 2021). That said, some scholars note that this distinction is not always universally recognized or consistently applied (Marshall, 2021).

2.2 Translanguaging vs. Plurilingualism

Both translanguaging and plurilingualism reject the rigid separation of named languages, yet their theoretical and pedagogical orientations diverge (García & Otheguy 2020). García and Lin (2017) describe a strong version of translanguaging, which rejects the notion of fixed, named languages and views bilingualism as a unified, dynamic repertoire. In this strong version, learners are not expected to treat their first language (L1) as a bridge to learning another; instead, they draw on all their linguistic resources to think, communicate, and make meaning. Teachers are encouraged to assess students' holistic communicative competence rather than proficiency in a specific language. Nevertheless, García and Lin acknowledge the existence of a “weak” version of translanguaging, which allows for limited language switching while maintaining clear language boundaries. They criticize this model for failing to challenge dominant language ideologies and institutional norms.

Although translanguaging offers a powerful reimagining of language use, it is difficult to implement in institutionalized foreign language education, such as Japanese programs in Canadian universities, where teaching still relies heavily on standardized curricula, named-language benchmarks, and traditional assessment frameworks. Plurilingualism, by contrast, integrates learners' languages while accepting the need for structured targets. It values flexible language use but recognizes that fully blended practices may not suit every academic or professional context (Auger, 2021). This balance, embracing learners' multiple linguistic resources yet aligning with institutional norms, makes plurilingual pedagogy a more practical fit for Japanese language education in Canadian universities.

3. Plurilingual Pedagogy in Canadian Language Classrooms: Benefits and Challenges

Plurilingual approaches have been increasingly applied in Canadian higher education, particularly within English language education (Galante, 2018; Galante, 2020a; Galante, 2020b; Marshall et al., 2019; Marshall & Moore, 2018). These studies highlight numerous benefits, including enhanced awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, improved critical thinking and cognitive flexibility, increased confidence and motivation, encouragement of creative language use and learner agency, and support for social inclusion. Moreover, they also challenge monolingual norms and raise awareness of English dominance.

However, these studies also point to several challenges in implementing plurilingual pedagogy. At the institutional level, many language programs continue to prioritize monolingual instruction and show resistance to change. This resistance is often reinforced by the absence of clear policy guidelines, and a lack of administrative or curricular support. Together, these factors make it difficult for educators to incorporate plurilingual approaches within current systems.

Moreover, there are additional challenges that have been discussed beyond the Canadian context. Pedagogically, instructors may view plurilingual activities as inefficient, especially when under pressure to cover required content (Auger, 2021). Immersion-based ideologies and insufficient teacher training also hinder implementation (Auger, 2021). Similar concerns arise in

assessment. As Saville and Seed (2021) note, plurilingual assessment requires learners to reflect on their language repertoires, which calls for specific training and support to be effective.

In Japanese language education, Matsumoto-Sturt et al. (2021) report that only one teacher training program in Australia and one in England explicitly include instruction in indirect teaching methods. These combined structural, pedagogical, and ideological barriers reflect wider international patterns and highlight the need for more comprehensive, systemic support.

4. Plurilingual Pedagogy in Japanese Language Education: Strategies and Gaps

Although still limited, a growing number of studies have explored ways to incorporate plurilingualism, multilingualism, and translanguaging into Japanese language education in higher education, with only one based in Canada. Some focus on classroom-based pedagogies: in the U.S., Iwasaki and Kumagai (2019) design a plurilingual critical literacies curriculum to help students reflect on language ownership and native–non-native power dynamics; in Japan, Gyogi (2022) examines how translation activities in an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) university shape student attitudes toward multilingual classroom practices; in Germany, Noro and Miwa (2022) combine plurilingual and democratic education to foster critical thinking and civic engagement; and in Canada, Hoshi and Yoshimizu (2023) use audiovisual translation to promote translingual and transcultural literacies through content-based instruction. Similarly, Matsumoto-Sturt et al. (2021), working in the UK, adapt Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to support multilingual and multicultural learning in Japanese programs.

Other studies emphasize cross-linguistic collaboration. Ikeda and Chikamatsu (2023) analyze a virtual exchange between U.S. learners and Japanese teacher trainees, highlighting students' use of translanguaging and full semiotic repertoires. Sugimori and Weng (2023) integrate Xu Bing's sinographic artworks into Chinese and Japanese language classrooms to foster cross-language collaboration, deepen understanding of hanzi and kanji, and promote student agency and intercultural awareness.

Despite these advances, significant barriers remain. Implementing such plurilingual curricula often requires resources such as funding, time, expertise, and departmental approval. As Mori (2023) points out, structural hierarchies in East Asian language programs often limit innovation, as tenured positions are typically held by white, North American-born literature or culture scholars, while racialized native-speaker language instructors are excluded from curriculum development and decision-making. No formal training currently exists for Japanese teachers to develop plurilingual pedagogy. Furthermore, studies tend to target intermediate or advanced learners, leaving beginner-level instructors with little guidance and making the initial shift toward plurilingual practice especially challenging.

5. Classroom-Based Plurilingual Activities for Japanese Language Teaching

In line with Mori's (2023) vision for inclusive Japanese classrooms, where plurilingual learners draw on their full repertoires and monolingual learners benefit from peer diversity, this section outlines practical strategies suitable for all levels, including beginner-level instruction. As Duff (2024) notes, 60% of students in the University of British Columbia's (UBC) Japanese program were born in Asia, many with Chinese or Korean language backgrounds. Reflecting this reality, the examples below draw on Chinese, Korean, and English. Rather than requiring a full

curriculum redesign, these strategies are simple, adaptable, and easily integrated into existing lessons.

5.1 Activate Prior Linguistic Knowledge

Students’ knowledge of Chinese, Korean, or English can be activated through comparisons in pronunciation, spelling, and grammar. Instructors might show how katakana loanwords adapt English sounds, with diphthongs and letters like *y* and *u* often mapping onto long vowels. Since nearly half of Japanese vocabulary consists of *kango*, phonological links to Mandarin can aid Chinese learners; for example, Mandarin finals like *-ng* or diphthongs such as *ao* and *iao* often correspond to long vowels in Japanese *on-yomi*, as in 高校 (*gāo xiào* → *kōkō*). While not always transparent, such patterns can help predict or recall vowel length. On the grammar side, teachers can compare Korean particles or highlight English–Japanese word order contrasts (SVO vs. SOV). These contrasts deepen linguistic awareness and promote transfer across languages.

5.2 Use False Friends to Build Awareness

False friends, similar-looking words with different meanings, are a rich resource for fostering metalinguistic awareness and preventing misunderstanding. For example, “マンション” in Japanese means *condominium*, not *a large house* as in English. Likewise, “手紙” (*tegami*) means *letter* in Japanese, but “手紙” in Mandarin (*shǒuzhǐ*) means *toilet paper*. By surfacing these discrepancies, instructors encourage learners to think critically about meaning. Such activities not only clarify potential points of confusion but also train students to approach vocabulary with caution and curiosity.

5.3 Explore Shared Vocabulary

Shared vocabulary across languages can be leveraged to build lexical networks and intercultural understanding. Sino-Xenic words, cognates of Chinese origin found across Japanese, Korean, and sometimes Vietnamese, illustrate how Chinese-origin words have spread and evolved in Japanese and Korean. Instructors can also show how Japanese *wasei kango*, such as “図書館” (*toshokan*), later borrowed into Chinese and Korean, reflect Japan’s role in shaping modern terminology. This approach validates learners’ linguistic repertoires while highlighting how Japanese connects to broader global networks.

Table 1

Example of the wasei kango “図書館” shared across Japanese, Mandarin, and Korean

Japanese	Mandarin	Korean
toshokan	tushuguan	doseogwan

5.4 Integrate Formative Assessment

Plurilingual perspectives can be incorporated into assessment through simple but meaningful activities. For example, reflection journals might prompt students to note how their other languages scaffolded their Japanese learning. Portfolios could collect samples of plurilingual work, such as multilingual vocabulary logs or translation comparisons. In addition, group discussions followed by brief self-assessment tasks allow all students to reflect on what strategies they used or noticed in their peers. These activities encourage metacognitive growth while legitimizing students' diverse language resources as valuable for learning.

5.5 Extend Learning Beyond the Classroom

Plurilingual approaches can also extend into co-curricular events. Language exchanges, for example, encourage students to practice Japanese while drawing on other linguistic skills, fostering community and cultural understanding in low-stakes settings. Other activities such as movie nights with Japanese-dubbed films, multilingual karaoke, or cultural potlucks create informal spaces where students share languages, traditions, and perspectives. These events lower barriers to participation and show that plurilingualism can be a natural part of students' broader academic and social lives.

6. Implications and Future Directions

To support further integration of plurilingual pedagogy, more empirical research, especially in Canadian Japanese classrooms, is needed to inform materials, training, and pedagogy. Vallejo and Dooly (2020) stress the value of student perspectives. Gyogi (2021), for instance, found that English L1 students were less receptive to plurilingual practices. These insights underscore the importance of careful implementation. As Marshall et al. (2019) argue, Canadian universities also bear a moral responsibility to support plurilingual students, many of whom are paying significantly higher international student tuition, by adopting inclusive pedagogies that recognize and value students' full linguistic repertoires. In embracing plurilingual pedagogy, Japanese language programs in Canada have the opportunity not only to reflect their students' realities, but to lead in building more equitable, linguistically inclusive education for the 21st century.

References

- Auger, N. (2021). Examining the nature and potential of plurilingual language education: Towards a seven-step plurilingual language education framework. In E. Piccardo, A. Germain-Rutherford & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (1st ed., pp. 465-483). Routledge.
- Duff, P. (2024, August 1-3). *Addressing “Diversity” through Professional Socialization and Curricular Transformation in Language Education* [Keynote Address]. International Conference on Japanese Language Education, Madison, WI, United States.
- Galante, A. (2018). *Plurilingual or Monolingual? A Mixed Methods Study Investigating Plurilingual Instruction in an EAP Program at a Canadian University*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
- Galante, A. (2020). Plurilingualism and TESOL in two Canadian post-secondary institutions: Towards context-specific perspectives. In S. M. C. Lau, & S. Van Viegen (Eds.), *Plurilingual pedagogies* (pp. 237-252). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36983-5_11
- Galante, A. (2020b). “The moment I realized I am plurilingual”: Plurilingual tasks for creative representations in EAP at a Canadian university. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 11(4), 551-580. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2018-0116>
- García, O., & Lin, A. M. Y. (2017). Translanguaging in bilingual education. In O. García, A. M. Y. Lin & S. May (Eds.), *Bilingual and multilingual education* (pp. 117-130). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02258-1_9
- García, O., & Otheguy, R. (2020). Plurilingualism and translanguaging: Commonalities and divergences. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(1), 17-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1598932>
- Gyogi, E. (2022). Plurilingual pedagogy in the Japanese language classroom: Benefits and challenges for creating more equitable classroom practices. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(9), 3289-3302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2022.2049689>
- Hoshi, S., & Yoshimizu, A. (2023). Promoting translingual and transcultural literacies in a collaborative content-based Japanese classroom: Audiovisual translation as pedagogy. In N. Chikamatsu, & L. Jin (Eds.), *A transdisciplinary approach to Chinese and Japanese language teaching* (1st ed., pp. 81-96). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266976-8>
- Ikeda, K., & Chikamatsu, N. (2023). Transcending borders and limitations with digitally enhanced pedagogy: Language learning-focused COIL (LLC) for Japanese learners and prospective teachers. In N. Chikamatsu, & L. Jin (Eds.), *A transdisciplinary approach to Chinese and Japanese language teaching* (1st ed., pp. 196-211). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266976-18>
- Iwasaki, N., & Kumagai, Y. (2019). “Making it your own by adapting it to what’s important to you”: Plurilingual Critical Literacies to Promote L2 Japanese Users’ Sense of Ownership of Japanese. *Reconceptualizing connections between language, literacy and learning*, 165-186. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26994-4_9
- Lory, M. (2021). Plurilingual practices: A Canadian perspective. In E. Piccardo, A. Germain-Rutherford & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (1st ed., pp. 417-423). Routledge.

- Marshall, S. (2021). Plurilingualism and the tangled web of lingualisms. In E. Piccardo, A. Germain-Rutherford & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (1st ed., pp. 46-64). Routledge.
- Marshall, S., & Moore, D. (2018). Plurilingualism amid the panoply of lingualisms: Addressing critiques and misconceptions in education. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 15(1), 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2016.1253699>
- Marshall, S., Moore, D., James, C. L., Ning, X., & Dos Santos, P. (2019). Plurilingual Students' Practices in a Canadian University: Chinese Language, Academic English, and Discursive Ambivalence. *TESL Canada Journal*, 36(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v36i1.1300>
- Matsumoto-Sturt, Y., Sasajima, S., & Okuno, Y. (2021). Nihongo kyōiku to CLIL apurōchi: Ōshū no fukugengo shugi no kanten kara – Nihongo kyōiku to eigo kyōiku to tagengo tabunka kyōiku [Japanese Language Education and CLIL Approach - From a European Multilingual Perspective: Teaching Japanese/English, and Multilanguage, Multicultural Education]. *Japan CLIL Pedagogy Association*, 7, 10-20.
- Mori, J. (2023). Teaching and learning of East Asian languages in the era of "trans-". In N. Chikamatsu, & L. Jin (Eds.), *A transdisciplinary approach to Chinese and Japanese language teaching* (1st ed., pp. 19-37). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266976-3>
- Moore, E., & Bernaus, M. (2021). Perspective 1: Plurilingual education in Europe: Contexts, initiatives and ongoing challenges. In E. Piccardo, A. Germain-Rutherford & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (1st ed., pp. 378-384). Routledge.
- Noro, K., & Miwa, S. (2022). *Fukugengo kyōiku toshite no "Nihongo kyōiku" no jissen: Sorezore no reberu de dekiru koto* [Practice of "Japanese language education" as plurilingual education: What can be done at each level]. In *Schriften der Gesellschaft für Japanforschung* (Vol. 5, pp. 87–102).
- Piccardo, E., Germain-Rutherford, A., & Lawrence, G. (2021). An introduction to plurilingualism and this handbook. In E. Piccardo, A. Germain-Rutherford & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (1st ed., pp. 1-15). Routledge.
- Saville, N., & Seed, G. (2021). Language assessment in the context of plurilingualism. In E. Piccardo, A. Germain-Rutherford & G. Lawrence (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education* (1st ed., pp. 360-376). Routledge.
- Sugimori, N., & Weng, L. (2023). An experiment of cross-language and cross-disciplinary collaboration: Integrating Xu Bing's text-based arts into Chinese and Japanese classrooms. In N. Chikamatsu, & L. Jin (Eds.), *A transdisciplinary approach to Chinese and Japanese language teaching* (1st ed., pp. 145-158). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266976-14>
- Vallejo, C., & Dooly, M. (2020). Plurilingualism and translanguaging: Emergent approaches and shared concerns. Introduction to the special issue. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1600469>