

## **Translingual Practices in Japanese EFL Classrooms: Challenging Monolingual Norms and Shaping Multilingual Identities**

**Maki Hignett**

*Language Education Center, Nagoya University, 464-8601 Nagoya, Japan*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

The study investigates how university students in Japan employ their linguistic resources in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and the impact on their translingual identities. Translingualism in this context refers to the practice of using a diverse linguistic repertoire, including one's first language (L1). Despite the global shift towards linguistic diversity, EFL education in Japan often adheres to monolingual norms, potentially fostering native speakerism, which limits the development of multilingual identities. In response to these challenges, this research explores how students navigate such environments and how their engagement in translingual practices influences their identity construction. Data were collected from 120 students via questionnaires and narrative interviews with 20 of them. These data underwent thematic analysis, with additional insights derived from a multilayered framework of social activity. The findings suggest that embracing multilingualism could serve as a pedagogically enriching resource rather than an obstructive hindrance, contesting the entrenched discouragement against the use of students' L1 Japanese in EFL settings. By offering a nuanced understanding of translingual practices among Japanese university students, this research contributes to the burgeoning discourse on multilingualism in language education. Consequently, it calls for a reconsideration of monolingual to multilingual pedagogical approaches in Japanese EFL contexts, thereby promoting a more inclusive and diversified language-learning environment.

*Keywords:* EFL in Japanese university context, multilingual identities, monolingual norms, native speakerism, translingualism

---

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received: 30 December 2025

Published: 06 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pp.2.1.009>

*E-mail address:*

Maki Hignett (hignett.maki.m7@f.mail.nagoya-u.ac.jp)

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's ever-globalising society, English serves as a vital medium for communication across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. The enhancement of English education has thus become a national

educational priority in Japan. There is a strong emphasis on fostering comprehensive communicative abilities that include not only an understanding of diverse cultures but also the maintenance of one's identity as a Japanese national (MEXT, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to engage in classroom activities that nurture students' global perspectives while respecting their sociocultural backgrounds. In line with this approach, this study views learners as translinguals, utilising a diverse linguistic repertoire that includes their L1. It investigates how Japanese university students employ their linguistic resources in EFL classrooms and how these practices influence their translingual identities.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Current perspectives on language education emphasise learners' multilingualism rather than solely on target language proficiency (Krulatz & Christison, 2023; May, 2019). This shift challenges the entrenched influence of monolingualism in language education, particularly English monolingualism, where learners' existing languages are often excluded (Wei, 2018). In Japan, however, the perception that EFL learners are monolingual remains prevalent, influenced by a pervasive ideology of native speakerism (Turnbull, 2020). This often leads students to prioritise monolingual norms over the creative use of their multilingual resources, reflecting societal discourses that privilege English over linguistic diversity (Kato & Kumagai, 2022). While affirming learners' identities facilitates language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023), such monolingual biases may hinder the development of multilingual identities (Berthele, 2021).

Language learners are increasingly seen as utilising all their linguistic resources within an integrated repertoire that transcends linguistic boundaries (Blommaert & Backus, 2013). This perspective is reflected in the notions of language as a flexible resource, adaptable to sociocultural and communicative needs (Canagarajah, 2017; García & Wei, 2014; Jørgensen, 2008; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). Consequently, the goal of EFL education is more widely recognised as the integrated use of multiple languages, including learners' L1. However, the idea that EFL learners are multilingual speakers has not gained significant traction in Japan's educational context (Turnbull, 2019). Therefore, this study considers learners as language users who engage in translingual practices and aims to contribute to an educational environment that better supports the development of language and identity.

## METHODS

This study adopts a narrative inquiry methodology to investigate the translingual practices of Japanese university students. Narrative inquiry explores how participants make sense of their subjective realities, providing insights into how they interpret their experiences of identity construction both as individuals and in relation to others (Barkhuizen, 2014). This approach is particularly suitable for examining individuals' navigation of complex

linguistic and social contexts, as it integrates personal narratives with broader theoretical frameworks. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to 120 students in compulsory general education English classes, complemented by interviews with 20 selected participants. These students were part of an English-only curriculum as a compulsory general education course across departments, regardless of proficiency levels. The data were initially analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes. The themes were then further examined, guided by the multilayered frameworks proposed by the Douglas Fir Group (2016) and Barkhuizen (2016), which align in their focus on social activity across different levels. The Douglas Fir Group's framework is organised in terms of dimensions of social activity, represented by micro, meso, and macro levels, which can also be understood from Barkhuizen's narrative perspective as three contextual levels—story, Story, and STORY (Barkhuizen, 2016). These scales of context extend the analysis beyond individual micro-level interactions to consider broader contextual influences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed insights into three key areas. The first is the role of ideologies both within and outside the classroom. Many students reported that when they are required to use only English in the classroom, they feel considerable peer pressure to avoid making mistakes, which makes them even more reluctant to use the language. One student explained, "I don't want to speak English in class unless I'm confident in doing it perfectly because I'm afraid of being embarrassed." Additionally, as none of the students were language majors, they often questioned the necessity of immersing themselves in English. Another student observed, "We're told we need to be able to speak English, so it's [the course is] mandatory, but to be honest, I don't really feel the need for it if I'm just in Japan," particularly because they felt that their future professional contexts in Japan would not require use of English. These perceptions reflect underlying ideologies: the pressure to speak English flawlessly like a native speaker and the belief that English holds limited value in Japan, reinforced by societal discourses (Kato & Kumagai, 2022; Turnbull, 2020).

The second area is the impact of using Japanese during class activities. One student noted, "I can't think in English, and I feel relieved when we're allowed to discuss things in Japanese during class. I can confirm my understanding with my classmates, which makes learning more efficient." This suggests that an English-only policy might inadvertently reduce learning effectiveness by limiting students' ability to leverage their full linguistic repertoire. Such policies often fail to account for the multilingual realities present in classroom settings (Heugh, 2021).

Thirdly, the data brought attention to pedagogical and institutional constraints. The requirement to use English exclusively resulted in obstacles. One student shared, "During writing assignments, we have to do even the brainstorming and outlining all in English

because the native [English-speaking] teachers don't understand Japanese. I feel like it's not for our benefit." This illustrates how a lack of accommodation for Japanese can make the learning process more challenging and counterproductive, exposing the limitations of monolingual norms in addressing learners' diverse needs and goals (Anderson, 2023). Institutional policies enforcing monolingual practices, along with native-speaking teachers often framing their inability to speak Japanese as part of their role as English instructors, create a language barrier, limiting teachers' capacity to fully support students' learning, ultimately diminishing the overall classroom experience.

These findings underscore the importance of focusing on learners' multilingual resources in EFL classrooms, revealed by the interplay between individual activity, classroom dynamics, and broader institutional and ideological structures. By promoting translanguaging practices within the multifaceted complexities that learners navigate, educators can create what can be termed a *pedagogical safe house* (Canagarajah, 2004) or *translingual safe house* (Qin & Llosa, 2023). Such environments provide legitimate participation opportunities for students (Lave & Wenger, 1991), allowing them to engage more fully in their learning process. Instead of conforming to native-speaker norms, it is crucial to value students' potential bilingualism.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that Japanese university students desire to use their full linguistic repertoire, navigating between Japanese and English in their learning processes. Translanguaging practices were found to contribute to a sense of security and effectiveness in learning. However, the emphasis on monolingual norms in the classroom prevents students from fully embracing their translanguaging identities. By promoting more inclusive learning environments that recognise students' linguistic resources, EFL education in Japan should empower students to engage in a world where linguistic diversity and the effective use of English are embraced as cornerstones of meaningful global interaction.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to everyone who supported us during the research process.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. (2023). Translanguaging: A paradigm shift for ELT theory and practice. *ELT Journal*, 78(1), 72-81. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccad057>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2014). Narrative research in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 47(4), 450-466. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444814000172>

- Barkhuizen, G. (2016). A short story approach to analysing teacher (imagined) identities over time. *TESOL Quarterly*, 50(3), 655-683. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.311>
- Berthele, R. (2021). The extraordinary ordinary: Re-engineering multilingualism as a natural category. *Language Learning*, 71(S1), 80-120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12407>
- Blommaert, J., & Backus, A. (2013). Superdiverse repertoires and the individual. In I. D. Saint-Georges & J. Weber (Eds.) *Multilingualism and multimodality* (pp. 9-32). Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-266-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-266-2_2)
- Canagarajah, S. (2004). Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.) *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 116-137). Cambridge University Press.
- Canagarajah, S. (2017). Translingual practice as spatial repertoires: Expanding the paradigm beyond structuralist orientations. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 31-54. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx041>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36-56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000191>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2023). Investment and motivation in language learning: What's the difference? *Language Teaching*, 56, 29-40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444821000057>
- Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(S1), 19-47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301>
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Language, bilingualism and education*. Springer.
- Heugh, K. (2021). Southern multilingualisms, translanguaging and transknowledging in inclusive and sustainable education. In P. Harding-Esch & H. Coleman (Eds.) *Language and the sustainable development goals* (pp. 37-47). British Council.
- Jørgensen, J. N. (2008). Polylingual languaging around and among children and adolescents. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 5(3), 161-176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710802387562>
- Kato, R., & Kumagai, Y. (2022). Translingual practices in a 'monolingual' society: Discourses, learners' subjectivities and language choices. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(5), 1681-1696. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1799318>
- Krultatz, A., & Christison, M. (2023). The multilingual turn in language education. In *Multilingual approach to diversity in education (MADE): A methodology for linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms* (pp. 1-23). Springer.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- May, S. (2019). Negotiating the multilingual turn in SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(S1), 122-129. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12531>
- MEXT. (2023). *The fourth basic plan for the promotion of education*. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan. [https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20240228-soseisk02-100000597\\_09.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20240228-soseisk02-100000597_09.pdf)

- Pennycook, A., & Otsuji, E. (2015). *Metrolingualism: Language in the city*. Routledge.
- Qin, K., & Llosa, L. (2023). Translingual caring and translingual aggression: (Re)centering criticality in the research and practice of translanguaging pedagogy. *The Modern Language Journal*, 107, 713-733. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12868>
- Turnbull, B. (2019). Translanguaging in the planning of academic and creative writing: A case of adult Japanese EFL learners. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 42(2), 232-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2019.1589603>
- Turnbull, B. (2020). Beyond bilingualism in Japan: Examining the translingual trends of a “monolingual” nation. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 24(4), 634-650. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006919873428>
- Wei, L. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9-30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx039>