

# Japanese High School Returnees' Identity: Translanguaging of the Mind, Body and Soul

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## Abstract

This study examines the experiences of two Japanese returnees through the concept of translanguaging using an Interpretative Phenomenological framework, a qualitative research methodology which supports the use of a variety of methods of data collection including interviews, narratives and language portraits. The analysis showed that the participants experienced some difficulties when they returned to Japan and attempted to integrate into Japanese school life including bullying and invisibility. However, attending English maintenance classes in addition to their mainstream classes was empowering as they could actuate their linguistic and cultural resources and create a new social, or third space for themselves. The language portraits they drew provided a snapshot of their present perspectives on their linguistic and cultural states and showed that despite early difficulties, both participants had been able to successfully integrate their experiences into their identities.

**Keywords :** translanguaging, Third Space concept, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method, identity, returnee

## 1. Introduction

The identity of two Japanese returnees at senior high school level are examined in this paper. Kanno (2000) characterizes returnees as children of Japanese expatriate business people who return to Japan after living overseas for an extended period. She uses the term identity to "refer to our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world" (Kanno, 2000, p. 3). Bhabha (1990) uses the postcolonial Third Space concept, a sociolinguistic theory of identity and community realized through language and education which could be useful to describe how the returnees feel when they come back to Japan. The returnees in this study have had transnational experiences and education in schools overseas, and on their return to Japan have subsequently enrolled in English maintenance classes for returnees after school. Because of the connection with other returnees, these after-school classes fill the role of an empowering third space for returnees where they can go after attending their regular school classes at either private or public Japanese schools. Here, students can discuss their Japanese- and English-speaking skills and cultural values, re-interpreting

and examining these in a third space and connecting with others with the same overseas experiences as a base. Pratt (1991, p. 34) defines the third space contact zone as “social places where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” and this is in fact what happened to the returnees in this study in their mainstream schools. However, more recently the intercultural zone of the third space has been defined as perhaps having more of a “transgressive and transformative spirit” (Macdonald & O’Regan, 2014, p. 553) with a focus on acceptance and transformation rather than clashing or grappling. Taking place after all-day mainstream school lessons these after-school classes seem to be a spring board that allows the students to continue to maintain a confidence in their English language ability and identity. Students can improve their language skills in reading by borrowing books in English on a weekly basis, writing journals and thinking critically about various topics, then discussing them with their native-English teachers and other returnees. This is perhaps more difficult to do in their Japanese schools during the day due to differing educational methods and focus as well as the large numbers of students in the classrooms, but also due to contrasting societal views on language and culture. In the junior and senior high schools the students in this study attended, no allowance was made for their higher English level, and no additional work such as extensive reading or critical thinking challenges were offered. However, these skills were practiced in their third space at the maintenance classes after school, allowing the participants to maintain and perhaps improve their language skills, share their cultural experiences together and find acceptance.

The concept of translanguaging also describes the experience the students are going through and may be defined as creating “a social space for the language user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience, and environment; their attitude, belief, and ideology; their cognitive and physical capacity, into one coordinated and meaningful performance” (Li, 2011, p. 1223). Translanguaging or the usage of different languages linguistically, cognitively and socially thus gives students a wider perspective of different worlds, cultures, and languages that enables them to, “mobilize their linguistic resources to create new social spaces for themselves” (Li & Zhu, 2013 p. 519) and this seems to be happening in their after-school classes rather than in their junior or senior high school English classes.

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method (IPA hereafter) as described in Hori and Sugihara (2022), is used in the present study, to examine the patterns seen in the data, and included careful reading and examination and searching for connections and themes. Smith et al. (2009) as quoted in Hori and Sugihara (2022, p. 10) defines the IPA method as “a person’s relatedness to a given phenomenon” such as “culture, language and locale”. In addition, language portraits (Chik et al., 2018), where the participants draw their language usage onto a sketch of a body, added in a new dimension that joined the mind, body and soul together, supporting the translanguaging concept that encompasses a more holistic picture of identity.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

Two Japanese participants, identified as B and C and aged 16 and 18 years at the time of data collection, were chosen for this study. Data for the remaining eleven students will be analyzed at a later date. At the time of data collection, all 13 students were in the last three years of Japanese senior high school aged from 15 to 18 years of age. The students were taking English maintenance classes after school in the evenings or on Saturdays and agreed to participate in the study with the support of the teachers and staff. As the participants were minors at the time of data collection, permission was obtained from their guardians to collect the data. The two participants chosen for the purposes of this study, had Japanese nationality, as did their parents and grandparents. Table 1 shows the two participants' demographic data comprising gender, age at data collection, overseas country, time spent overseas, age at departure overseas and age of return to Japan.

Table 1: Two participants' background information

Participants	Age at data collection	Overseas country	Time spent overseas	Languages spoken	Age left Japan	Age on return to Japan
B (female)	16;03	USA	6.5 years	Japanese (L1) English (L2)	4;08	10;11
C (male)	18;02	USA	7.0 years	Japanese (L1) English (L2)	1;01	8;03

### 2.2 Method

The data analysis uses the IPA method (Smith et al., 2009) to identify the students' connections to culture, language and identity and data was collected in four different ways:

1. An online questionnaire
2. An hour-long interview recorded in person and later transcribed
3. Two auto-biographical stories about an experience that shaped their identity while living overseas and after their return to Japan
4. A language portrait and how this portrait expressed the language experiences of the students.

### 2.3 Procedure

Data collection took place in English, in person prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, from November 2019 to January 2020. However, due to the 13 participants living in different locations, after the initial face-to-face meeting and participant observation in their English classes (not recorded to establish rapport), communication took place online via email, with the final interviews

conducted on Facetime, Skype or Line. The researchers collated the English language data, read the stories repeatedly, and examined the language portraits many times in order to discover common themes and patterns using the IPA method which is “a qualitative approach which aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience(s)... including a detailed examination of particular experiences, events and states” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41).

The common themes included: (1) life overseas (2) school life back in Japan (elementary school, junior high school and senior high school) (3) lack of support and invisibility (4) a third space concept - after-school English maintenance classes and two languages (5) place back in Japanese society and lastly the creative dimension of (6) language portraits.

Two out of the 13 participants were chosen for examination as a preliminary study and the results and analysis are presented below.

### 3. Results & Analysis

#### 3.1 Life Overseas

The first theme elicited from the data was life overseas in the USA for the two participants in this study. For both participants, their US experiences took place while they were young - from age 4 for B and age 1 for C, encompassing both kindergarten and several years of elementary school and lasted until B was 10 years of age and C was 8, when they returned to Japan. Their lives overseas, seemed to be primarily positive, with support provided by teachers or the communities when they needed help. They enjoyed interests outside school but mentioned there were some negative aspects of their overseas experiences. Both students looked back on their time in the USA with fond memories of the cultural aspects of the lifestyle, however there were some challenges. B felt that she was called upon to represent Japan as an ambassador and felt proud of her Japanese identity (see Table 2).

Table 2: Life in the US for the two participants at elementary school level (in their own words)

Names	Interests	Dreams	Experiences	Favorite smells	Ambassador role
B	Reading, dancing, music, TV shows about food	Firefighter	Japanese Saturday school difficulties with <i>kanji</i> , gun drills at elementary school	Cinnamon and seasonal spices, freshly cut grass	Making origami, calligraphy, wearing a yukata
C	Archery	Archery expert	Delicious American food, not afraid to speak up in class, more outgoing	The smell of soil and air unable to be smelt in Japan due to all the concrete	Unwilling Pokemon expert

Living in a rural area of the US, she felt welcomed by the locals and neighbors and said about that experience:

*Whenever people pass by during the day, they smile at each other even if they don't really know each other. They're more open and smiley. I often went to my neighbor's house to watch movies and play games, so I always felt like I belonged there.*

C said that he had mainly good memories from his time in the US though he was an unwilling *Pokemon* ambassador called upon as the ultimate source of information by his friends (see Table 2).

*I believe that elementary school shaped my personality during that time. The classes were made to make you outgoing. I had many good friends and now, that experience gives me confidence especially when I present in front of others.*

The challenges that the participants experienced living in the US were firstly B's attendance at Japanese Saturday school and inability to master *kanji* which seemed to have a ripple effect as this continued even after she had returned to Japan, making her feel as though she was forever behind in her written Japanese. In addition, she found it difficult to connect with the other Saturday Japanese school students in the US when they met once a week.

*I hated kanji and I always wondered why I had to go to Japanese school in the first place. My Japanese school was the only Japanese community that I knew then. I felt like there was no place for me there.*

C struggled with his Japanese cultural identity not wanting to be different from the other American elementary school students around him. In particular, he had the feeling that eating the Japanese-style lunchboxes his mother prepared for him would make him stand out from the norm at his US elementary school, so threw them away before anyone would notice.

*I did not want to stand out, and I did not want to be bullied. Honestly, I don't remember if there was actual bullying, but I do remember throwing away my bento in the trash without eating it every day. I am not proud of what I did.*

### **3.2 School life back in Japan**

The next theme elicited arose after the two students had returned to Japan and re-entered the Japanese education system at age 10 and 8 respectively. Both describe the difficulties of adjusting to life back in Japan. B talks about starting at a public Japanese elementary school rather than a private school that many returnees would have attended.

*I was thinking of going to school where there were lots of returnee students, but I ended up going to a regular Japanese school. Since I spent so much time in the United States, I didn't really know*

*what it was like here [in Japan] and it took me a long time to adapt to everything and that was really hard.*

C experienced bullying at elementary and junior high school, but he finally felt accepted after enrolling in a private senior high school.

At elementary school level:

*I went to an ordinary public elementary school, so there were almost no returnees besides me. I guess I stood out. I was bullied...going to school became a struggle for me every day. I seriously thought that dying would be better than having to feel this pain every day.*

At junior high school:

*I ended up having my top front teeth broken because of the bullying which just escalated. Being a returnee felt like a curse to me.*

At senior high school:

*Because of this [bullying] struggle [senior] high school felt like heaven to me. Everyone was nice, and there were a lot of returnees.*

### **3.3 Lack of support and invisibility**

Once the students had re-entered the public school system in Japan, there was limited support offered to help them adjust back, and their linguistic and cultural heritage from their time in the US became invisible and unacknowledged in the school pedagogies. Both participants experienced a sudden loss of language and had limited access to a counselor to help them deal with their new situation. In Japan, there is usually only a school nurse at elementary school level for minor medical injuries. Most public schools in Japan lack a full-time counselor though visits by such personnel can be organized or referrals made. According to Nishio et al. (2020, p. 530) “General teachers take on the role of the Western countries’ school counselors. Specialists who can be approached for social support are also few compared to Western countries.”

In junior high school, both participants were required to attend beginner English classes along with other students who had never studied English before, without being offered alternatives or extra work. Thus, even with their native-level English skills, returnees become invisible in the large English classes at their public schools. Additional lessons aimed at returnee students needing to catch up with core subjects in Japanese such as mathematics, *kokugo* Japanese language, social studies, or history are not offered as a general rule, and instead these students need to attend a *juku* or cram school. As discussed above, both students faced difficulties on their return, and for C the bullying continued through the whole of junior high school and it was only at his private senior high school that he was able to regain his confidence in himself. C was invisible at his elementary

and junior high school and the bullying was allowed to continue. B mentions that her junior high school English classes were not divided into different ability levels, and the teachers gave up on offering her an alternative to the beginner English classes everyone was required to take. She also became just another invisible returnee that had to adjust to everyone else's rudimentary English level.

*The teachers were trying to help me, but it didn't work out, because they didn't get it.*

C talked about the need to hide his English ability and try to remain invisible after he returned to Japan from the age of 8 through to the end of junior high school. In the following excerpt he describes his junior high school English classes.

*I took the same [English] classes as everyone else. It was kind of difficult to show the teacher what I could do, because there were no returnees around me, and I just didn't want to look like I was boasting...I had to keep myself from speaking with correct pronunciation.*

### **3.4 Third space at after-school English maintenance classes and two languages**

While these two students experienced a sense of invisibility, difficulty making friends and a lack of support at their public schools after returning to Japan, the after-school English classes provided an oasis of sorts where they could meet other returnees, and use their English skills without having to hide them. In addition, there were extra materials such as books that they enjoyed reading and could borrow, as well as activities in which they could proactively participate such as journal writing, debating and discussing deeper issues in their second language. The other students understood and shared their overseas experiences and they could all feel protected and able to be themselves, and combine their identity with both cultures. B described the after-school classes and her love of reading which she could foster there.

*I'm just trying to make sure I don't lose my English skills, so I can build upon it once I go to college or go somewhere...away from Japan...I like writing English and I also love reading in English.*

C also mentioned his love of reading, and how he was trying to work hard in English maintenance classes even though it was only once a week, to improve his English as much as possible.

*The time is limited, so I try to make the most out of every class. When I am studying and I need a break, sometimes I just open up an English book because it really changes my direction of concentration.*

### 3.5 Place in Japanese society

The two participants seemed more able to acknowledge that their experiences play a part in their identity now that they have reached high school level and appear to be more at home with themselves and their two languages and cultures. B was considering studying at an overseas university, and was continuing her efforts to further improve her English skills. She said that she wants to work in a field where she can help others and give them support. C has since enrolled in a Japanese university to study law so that he can protect the rights of those who are in a weaker position in society. B said that she feels she belongs in two countries, and her languages and feelings reflect that reality.

*Japan is my home away from home ... America is my home away from home. Communication means no matter what language is used - it can be verbal or non-verbal as long as you're expressing your feelings and emotions.*

Following on from the trauma of elementary school and junior high school after returning to Japan, C now feels more comfortable with his current language levels in English and Japanese and is able to connect with his feelings in Japanese too.

*Right now, I think I am pretty much well balanced in both languages. When I speak in English I feel in English, and when I speak Japanese, I try to process my feelings in Japanese.*

### 3.6 Language Portraits

Language portrait silhouettes were used to examine the participants' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, in order to give more depth to information about the participants at the time of data collection, as well as adding to the holistic aspect of translanguaging by examining the portraits many times to elicit themes. The use of language portrait silhouettes has been used in various studies to explore how language and culture influence learners' beliefs and practices, and to reveal their relationships with language (Chik et al., 2018). The participants were given a blank body silhouette and asked to draw their representation of their languages on it. The language portrait silhouette provides a link to natural symbolism, for example, the heart and head representing thoughts and feelings about the meaning of language and heritage. Many participants allocate and differentiate languages by using the head or heart. The head is often used to represent the dominant language and the heart, the heritage language (Chik et al., 2018).

B wrote on her portrait (Figure 1), "*If Japanese was red and English was blue, I would be purple !!*" and expresses this visually by coloring her portrait in red and blue fairly equally. Colors often indicate emotional associations with particular languages (Busch, 2012) and B indicated how she has successfully integrated her languages and cultures. We can see everything is equally



distributed, including her heart and her head. The heart is often used to depict heritage languages with both English and Japanese being represented equally. She added the textual explanation, “*I think & feel with both*” to the image of her brain emphasizing that neither language is dominant and she feels equally comfortable in both. She also added text explaining more about the decisions she made regarding her hands in the portrait. Her left hand is the only part of her body that she colored red, representing her Japanese heritage and daily practice and she notated it “*I use chopsticks.*” She colored her right hand purple and notated it “*I write & learn both [languages] with my right hand.*” Hands often represent lived experiences and the actions we take in our daily lives, with her left hand indicating her location in Japan and her associated daily activities, and her right hand how she feels she is able to combine English and Japanese in her life. Many of the 13 participants including B mentioned their difficulties learning *kanji*.

C’s portrait, was drawn more simply in pencil only (see Figure 2). C divided his silhouette precisely in half with English on one side and Japanese on the other indicating a balance between the two languages, but also perhaps a separation or disconnectedness. He drew the “J” for “Japanese” and the “E” for “English” in equal sizes on both his head and his chest representing the equality that the two languages have in his life. His portrait expressed the contradictions that he has experienced in Japan with society both endorsing the value of learning English and Japanese, while at the same time separating and rejecting English.

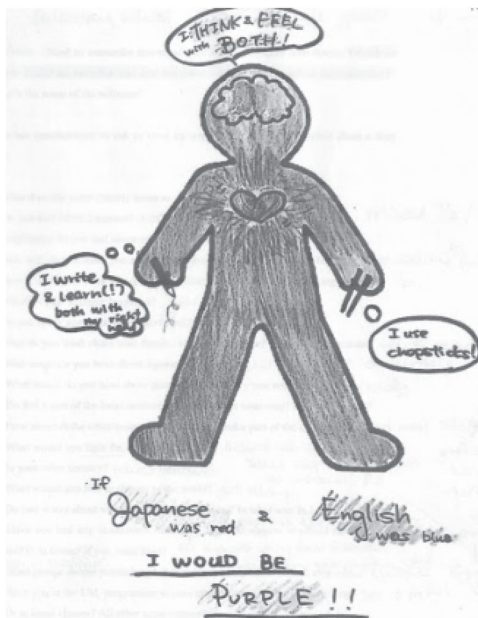


Figure 1: B's language portrait



Figure 2: C's language portrait

#### 4. Conclusion

This study attempts to explore the identity of two Japanese high school returnees through their translanguaging experience. This included their time living and going to school in the U.S., their return to Japan and entry into the public education system at elementary school level and their subsequent education, lack of support and invisibility within the school environment, and their third space at after-school English maintenance classes. Their classmates were other returnees, who were all provided a place where they shared similar experiences and did not need to pretend about the level of their English or their love of English reading. The Japanese media and Japanese society often portray language and culture in binary terms or Japan versus the rest of the world, which is something the participants have struggled with in their attempts to adapt and integrate into Japanese society. This study presents a more holistic, unique and richly embroidered view using various data collection methods to avoid a binary perspective and incorporate a translanguaging approach.

Despite the participants' suggestions that Japanese society places great importance on mastering two languages, specifically Japanese and English, they found that their everyday experiences contradicted this as their English skills were ignored inside the regular school classroom, and they were bullied. Ignoring these students' heritages could have increased the probability of them becoming monolingual by the time they completed mainstream education in the dominant language (Cummins, 2007), but they have strived to keep both languages alive and are now proud of their language skills and identities. Their lack of access to a speech community in English within Japanese society at large, has perhaps been addressed by regular attendance at their English classes after school.

Lastly, there seemed to be hope in the participants' visions for the future in Japan or overseas. B who envisions herself colored purple in her language portrait feels more content in her identity as she moves upwards in her education: "*If Japanese was red and English was blue, I would be purple*". C made one last comment in his own story about identity and how this has changed over the years since he returned to Japan from the US concluding with the way his experiences have changed him mind, body and soul.

*Now I believe my experiences shaped me into a better person. I also feel pride about being a returnee. However, I will still have to live with the scars I suffered.*

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