

The Importance of a Linguistically Enabling Environment

Observations at the New International School of Japan

Project Tokyo Case Study 3

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During the Project Tokyo's visit to the New International School of Japan, it became clear that the classroom environment functions as far more than a physical space; it represents a dynamic linguistic foundation for growth, discovery, and the holistic development of learners. This study therefore examines the significance of pedagogical principles observed in practice, including multiage learning, bilingualism, resilience, child-centred curricula, translanguaging, and scaffolding. Each of these elements contributes to the creation of inclusive and responsive educational settings in which learners are encouraged to draw upon their full range of linguistic and cognitive resources.



The theoretical framing of this case study draws upon the work of several leading scholars. Rosemary Erlam, a prominent researcher in second language acquisition and teacher education in New Zealand, has demonstrated how classroom environments and instructional methodologies can support learners of additional languages. Her work highlights the importance of pedagogical design in shaping outcomes for multilingual learners. Complementing this perspective, Ofelia García, a Cuban-American scholar renowned for her pioneering contributions to bilingual education and translanguaging, positions language practices as transformative tools that validate learners' identities and enhance access to knowledge.

In addition, the sociocultural theories of Lev Vygotsky provide a critical lens for understanding language development. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates how learners acquire language most effectively when guided by teachers or peers within scaffolded environments. Together, these perspectives illuminate how classrooms can function as transformative spaces that nurture resilience, foster bilingualism, and empower learners through translanguaging and collaborative support.

Environmental Pedagogical Approaches and Language Development

Multiage Learning

Multiage education provides a distinctive context for language acquisition by situating learners within more fluid groups where linguistic input and output are naturally varied. In such classrooms, younger learners are exposed to more advanced vocabulary, discourse structures, and pragmatic norms through interaction with older peers. Conversely, older learners consolidate their linguistic knowledge by modelling, explaining, and rephrasing concepts for younger classmates. This reciprocal exchange reflects Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development Theory, where scaffolding occurs through peer (social) collaboration as well as teacher guidance. The multiage model also can reduce the pressure of age-based expectations, creating a climate in which learners feel comfortable experimenting with new linguistic forms. Risk-taking, a critical component of language acquisition, is encouraged because learners perceive mistakes as part of a shared

developmental journey rather than as individual shortcomings. Thus, multiage classrooms at the New International School of Japan function as dynamic linguistic communities in which language growth is accelerated through authentic, socially embedded practice.

During the team's visit to the New International School of Japan, the Welsh Delegation observed first-hand the implementation of multiage education and noted how effectively this pedagogical model functioned within the classroom context. The delegation witnessed a thriving environment in which children were encouraged to engage in activities without fear of judgement. Learners demonstrated resilience by attempting tasks with confidence, showing little hesitation or concern about making mistakes. This willingness to "give it a go" reflected a classroom climate that normalised experimentation and positioned errors as part of a collective learning journey.

The delegation further observed that the multiage structure facilitated the development of meaningful relationships and friendships across age groups. Children interacted fluidly with peers of different ages, which contributed to a sense of comfort and inclusivity. This dynamic not only supported social integration but also reinforced the pedagogical value of multiage education as a tool for fostering collaboration, empathy, and mutual support.

Bilingualism

The bilingual orientation of the New International School of Japan is evident in both its physical environment and pedagogical design. Resources and classroom artefacts are consistently labelled in English and Japanese, providing constant visual reinforcement of vocabulary across languages. Instruction alternates between English, Japanese, or blended approaches, ensuring that learners encounter both languages in meaningful contexts. This design supports language acquisition by embedding bilingualism into everyday routines, thereby normalising the use of multiple languages.

Rosemary Erlam's research underscores the academic and cultural benefits of such environments, arguing that bilingualism enables learners to succeed in the instructional language while preserving heritage identities. Ofelia García's translanguaging framework complements this by positioning bilingualism as a dynamic repertoire rather than two discrete systems. Learners draw flexibly on both languages to construct meaning, thereby deepening comprehension and accelerating acquisition. Together, these perspectives highlight how bilingual classrooms foster metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, and identity affirmation. In practice, the school's bilingual ethos ensures that learners are not only acquiring linguistic competence but also developing the confidence to navigate multiple linguistic worlds simultaneously.

The Welsh Delegation observed that all resources at the New International School of Japan were dual-labelled in English and Japanese. This practice ensured that learners felt comfortable navigating both languages, with neither given priority over the other. Such an environment reinforced bilingualism as a shared norm and provided constant visual support for vocabulary acquisition across languages.

Within a lesson observation, the delegation noted that the language of instruction was delivered bilingually. Teachers collaborated seamlessly, alternating between English and Japanese in a manner that allowed both languages to flow effortlessly throughout the lesson. This approach enabled learners to grasp meaning across linguistic contexts, while also modelling the natural integration of bilingual communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, these practices demonstrate how bilingual education can be embedded into everyday routines and the environment in ways that normalise multilingualism and foster confidence. The delegation recognised that such strategies are transferable to their own schools, where dual-language labelling, collaborative teaching, and the creation of supportive classroom climates can strengthen bilingual practice. These observations affirm the purposeful nature of bilingual pedagogy, highlighting its role in promoting linguistic competence, metalinguistic awareness, and learner confidence.

Resilience

Resilience within the classroom is closely tied to language development. Learners who are encouraged to take risks with unfamiliar vocabulary, grammatical structures, and pronunciation, learn to understand that mistakes are integral to the learning process. This safe environment reduces linguistic anxiety and fosters willingness to experiment, which is essential for acquisition. When learners recover from errors through supportive feedback, they internalise linguistic forms more deeply, reinforcing both accuracy and fluency.

From a sociocultural perspective, resilience is cultivated when learners are scaffolded to attempt tasks just beyond their current ability. In language learning, this means being consistently challenged to expand vocabulary, refine syntax, and engage in extended discourse. The iterative cycle of trial, error, and success strengthens linguistic competence while building confidence. Resilience therefore functions as both

a psychological and linguistic resource, enabling learners to persist in the face of communicative challenges and ultimately achieve greater proficiency.

The Welsh Delegation observed these principles in practice during their visit to the New International School of Japan. Within the natural classroom environment, children were seen to thrive and become more resilient each day. Learners engaged confidently in linguistic tasks, supported by a climate that was safe, inclusive, and free from judgement. In such environments, children were willing to persevere demonstrating that risk-taking was not only accepted but celebrated as part of the learning journey. This atmosphere allowed learners to flourish, reinforcing the idea that resilience is nurtured through supportive, bilingual, and multiage contexts where mistakes are reframed as opportunities for growth.

Child-Centred Curricula

Child-centred approaches situate learners' interests, identities, and developmental needs at the core of instruction. This orientation is particularly powerful for language acquisition because it ensures that linguistic input is meaningful and relevant. When learners engage with topics that resonate with their experiences, they are more motivated to participate in extended dialogue, ask questions, and negotiate meaning. Such authentic use of language accelerates acquisition by embedding linguistic practice in contexts that matter to learners.

Learners encounter linguistic forms that stretch their abilities while remaining accessible, thereby promoting steady growth in vocabulary, syntax, and communicative competence. Child-centred curricula thus create conditions in which language learning is not abstract or imposed but embedded in purposeful, identity-affirming experiences.

The Welsh Delegation observed these principles in practice during lessons at the New International School of Japan. They noted that learning was predominantly child-led, with opportunities for learners to express their opinions about their own learning. This participatory approach empowered children to take ownership of their educational journey, reinforcing motivation and engagement. By positioning learners as active contributors rather than passive recipients, the school created a climate in which language development was both personalised and socially meaningful.

Translanguaging

Translanguaging practices are central to the school's pedagogical design, allowing learners to mobilise their full linguistic repertoires to make sense of new concepts. Rather than restricting learners to one language, translanguaging legitimises fluid movement between languages, enabling learners to scaffold new learning through familiar linguistic resources. García's work highlights how translanguaging validates identity and enhances comprehension, positioning it as a transformative practice in bilingual education. Translanguaging at the New International School of Japan was both natural and effortless. This practice occurred within a safe, supportive environment that actively encouraged risk-taking and experimentation with language.

For language acquisition, translanguaging accelerates vocabulary development, strengthens conceptual clarity, and fosters metalinguistic awareness. Learners can access meaning through their stronger language and then transfer understanding into the target language, thereby deepening retention and expanding communicative competence. In the observed classrooms, translanguaging was not treated as a fallback strategy but as a deliberate pedagogical choice that empowered learners to construct knowledge collaboratively. This practice underscores the principle that language acquisition is most effective when learners are permitted to draw flexibly on all available linguistic resources.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding represents the pedagogical backbone of language acquisition. Teachers and peers provide structured support (such as modelling vocabulary, rephrasing sentences, offering prompts) that gradually diminishes as learners gain independence. This process aligns directly with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development Theory, where learners achieve linguistic outcomes beyond their immediate capabilities when guided appropriately.

In language learning, scaffolding ensures that learners are exposed to comprehensible input while being supported to produce output that stretches their abilities. Over time, the removal of scaffolds fosters autonomy, fluency, and confidence. In the classrooms observed, scaffolding was evident in teacher questioning, peer collaboration, and resource design, all of which created a layered environment where language growth was continuous and intentional. By embedding scaffolding into daily practice, the school ensures that learners are consistently advancing their linguistic competence within supportive, structured frameworks. Teachers upheld the notion of iterative process

of trial, error, and success which exemplified how social resilience and linguistic resilience is cultivated through communicative interaction and collaborative learning whilst further promoting proficiency.

These practices align closely with Ofelia García's translanguaging framework, which positions bilingualism as a dynamic repertoire rather than two separate systems. In the observed classrooms, learners drew flexibly on both English and Japanese to construct meaning, negotiate understanding, and support one another. This translanguaging environment not only facilitated comprehension but also reinforced resilience, as children were empowered to use all of their linguistic resources without fear of error or judgement.

Conclusion

The language enabling environment at the New International School of Japan demonstrates that language acquisition is most effectively nurtured within inclusive, dynamic, and carefully designed pedagogical spaces. Multiage learning fosters reciprocal scaffolding, enabling learners to acquire new linguistic forms through peer collaboration and mentoring. Bilingualism, embedded in both the physical and instructional fabric of the school, affirms cultural identity while expanding cognitive flexibility. Resilience is cultivated as learners are encouraged to take risks, recover from mistakes, and persist in their linguistic development. Child-centred curricula ensure that language input is meaningful and relevant, motivating learners to engage authentically with discourse. Translanguaging practices validate learners' full repertoires, allowing them to construct knowledge fluidly across languages, while scaffolding provides the structured support necessary for learners to progress beyond their immediate capabilities.

As a result, it is recommended that these approaches are systematically fully embedded into practice, as they collectively foster linguistic competence, learner confidence, and holistic development. Wales can now commit to further developing these strategies and applying them with a deeper theoretical understanding, recognising that their impact extends beyond language acquisition. By situating translanguaging and bilingualism as natural and purposeful practices, aligning instruction with child centred principles, and cultivating resilience through scaffolded risk-taking, educators can create environments in which learners thrive both academically and personally. The delegation's findings affirm that these strategies are not only effective but essential, and their continued application will strengthen pedagogical design while advancing inclusive, future-focused education.

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