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"This side is the real world and the other one is like Minecraft" Using an almost wordless picture book to explore Japanese primary school students' cultural awareness

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Abstract

English has been introduced as a core subject in primary schools across Asia over the past decade. Besides aiming to improve the English proficiency of Japanese primary school students, Japan's recent reforms also mandate the development of children's awareness of cultures other than their own. However, relatively little is known about pedagogical strategies to achieve cultural awareness in the Japanese primary school classroom. The objective of this study was, therefore, to utilize an almost wordless picture book and examine the ways children interpret stories about people from cultures other than their own. This study explored the independent meaning-making practices and processes of six Japanese primary school students as they viewed, without teacher intervention, Mirror, an Australian almost wordless picture book about the daily lives of an Australian and a Moroccan family. Interview and observation data provided insights into the children's meaning-making processes and the ways they interpreted the messages within the stories that led to a range of understandings and misunderstandings across the cultures. The paper concludes with a discussion about pedagogical implications for supporting the development of cultural awareness, for challenging cultural stereotypes, and for facilitating English language learning processes.

Publication Details

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English has been introduced as a core subject in primary schools across Asia over the past decade. Besides aiming to improve the English proficiency of Japanese primary school students, Japan's recent reforms also mandate the development of children's awareness of cultures other than their own. However, relatively little is known about pedagogical strategies to achieve cultural awareness in the Japanese primary school classroom. The objective of this study was, therefore, to utilize an almost wordless picture book and examine the ways children interpret stories about people from cultures other than their own. This study explored the independent meaning-making practices and processes of six Japanese primary school students as they viewed, without teacher intervention, *Mirror*, an Australian almost wordless picture book about the daily lives of an Australian and a Moroccan family. Interview and observation data provided insights into the children's meaning-making processes and the ways they interpreted the messages within the stories that led to a range of understandings and misunderstandings across the cultures. The paper concludes with a discussion about pedagogical implications for supporting the development of cultural awareness, for challenging cultural stereotypes, and for facilitating English language learning processes.

Key Words: Almost wordless picture book, Japanese primary school students, cultural awareness, English language teaching, meaning-making processes

1. Introduction

Teaching English to young learners is a rapidly growing area within the field of English language teaching (ELT). Reflecting this growth is a number of useful resources that are now available to practitioners and researchers (e.g., Garton & Copland, 2018; Emery & Rich, 2015; Nikolov, 2016; Rich, 2014; Shintani, 2016; Spolsky & Moon, 2012), as well as the inaugural publication of the first issue of *Language Teaching for Young Learners* in 2019. Along with these developments, educational reforms making English education mandatory at the primary school level has also attracted considerable attention in foreign language (FL) teaching. This is particularly true for many Asian countries (Butler, 2019a; Spolsky & Moon, 2012). One of the goals of these reforms is to improve the communicative ability of young learners (Butler, 2004). In Japan, increasing emphasis has also been put on teaching about foreign cultures and on fostering primary school students' cultural awareness in addition to their foreign language ability (Davidson, 2019; MEXT, 2017). The Japanese government regards cultural awareness, defined as "a conscious understanding of the role culture plays in language learning and communication (in both first and foreign languages)" (W. Baker, 2012, p. 65) as an important element in shaping more globally-minded citizens. One approach to augmenting cultural understanding recommended in Australia is to use almost wordless picture books (BOS, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether

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this approach might also be effective in raising cultural awareness in the Japanese primary school classroom.

2. Cultural awareness and pedagogy in the foreign language classroom

Cultivating positive attitudes towards foreign cultures has become an important priority in many FL programs around the word to enhance learners' communicative ability in English (Munandar & Newton, 2021; Sowa, 2014). The inquiry into practices that serve to enhance – with and without teacher guidance – the development of learners' cultural awareness has, therefore, grown substantially in the ELT literature. Overall, effective pedagogy is seen as providing opportunities for learners to find, explore, and compare differences and similarities between cultures and their own local culture (Byram, 2008, Sowa, 2014). The use of technology, for instance, has afforded such opportunities. Synchronous and asynchronous online tools to connect learners located in different geographical areas (e.g., telecollaborations), or instant messaging platforms (e.g., WeChat), have been utilized to create collaborative learning scenarios that facilitate FL learners' cultural learning, cultural awareness, and foreign language competence (Wu & Miller, 2021; O'Dowd, 2011).

Commercially published textbooks are a recognized and widely used resource for facilitating students' language and culture learning (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Yet, research has revealed that textbooks, such as the frequently used *New Headway* series, often contain cultural biases and unrealistic representations of the target society, resulting in stereotypes and may, therefore, not be as suitable for the development of FL students' cultural awareness as commonly believed (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020). Further complicating the issue is that teachers often find it challenging to select additional sources to compensate for the gaps in textbooks (Manjarrés, 2009). However, images included in textbooks appear to facilitate FL students' process of cultural learning and awareness. Kiss and Weninger (2017), for example, found that by viewing pictures rather than reading text, students "create a multitude of interpretations that are based on their personal experiences and memberships in certain cultural and social groups" (p.193). The researchers concluded that developing cultural awareness was an interactive process that occurred between the learners, materials, and the teacher, with the learners playing a particularly critical role in the development of cultural learning.

This notion aligns with Holliday's (2018) proposition that students' previous and existing cultural experiences are an important resource in the pedagogy of cultural learning. It also concurs with the view that the reader's stance and unique background, including topic knowledge (i.e., schemata), experiences, and values, as well as the overt and implied ideologies existing in a text contribute reciprocally between the reader and the text to the overall textual meaning-making process (e.g., Grabe, 2009). As such, the familiarity with and understanding of context aids comprehension and leads to the construct of new experiences. Furthermore, the reader has long been seen as playing an active role in the story in that they identify with the characters, including their feelings and conflicts. This active role produces meaning (Rosenblatt, 1982), and the opportunity to explore different world views (in response to images and text) builds cultural awareness and learning.

Yet, the limited lived experiences and reading abilities of young learners may make the development of cultural awareness and sensitivity challenging. Supplementing the textbook with, for instance, visual images (Kiss & Weninger, 2017), is likely to be an effective strategy to facilitate young learners' meaning-making process and cultural awareness. Thus, in this present study, we

used an almost wordless picture book with images that represent real-life scenarios, cultural diversity, and ideologies to explore whether this type of resource can indeed "encourage thinking, reflection, and inquiry, and empower learners to develop [cultural awareness]" (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020, p.640), and, ultimately, be utilized effectively in the FL classroom for young learners.

3. English teaching and cultural awareness at Japanese primary school level

Coinciding with hosting the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) has put increased emphasis on Japanese people "developing social competencies for survival (by having diverse experiences through relationships with various peoples) in a globalizing society" (MEXT, n.d., n.p.). English teaching and learning at the primary school level in Japan has also been on the forefront of attention in recent years. In 2014, an English Education Reform Plan was issued for English instruction to become a compulsory subject in Grades 5 and 6 from 2020 onwards (see Butler, 2021, for a discussion about policy and English teaching in Japanese primary schools). Japanese primary school teachers are expected to use government-approved textbooks in English lessons taught three times a week to "nurture basic English language skills" (MEXT, 2014, n.p.). As the following quote shows, the reforms also implied the enhancement of Japanese students' cultural awareness: "With the advance of globalization, it is necessary to foster global individuals in the early stages of [primary] school as well as lower and upper secondary school who excel in language, communication skills, subjectivity and *understanding towards different cultures*" (MEXT, 2016, p. 10, emphasis added). Fostering cultural understanding to enhance the basic English skills of Japanese children appears to feature more prominently than in MEXT's previous reforms (Keirinkan, 2017; MEXT, 2017).

Learning about foreign cultures in Japanese primary English classes is supported by the view that language and culture are intertwined (Munandar & Newton, 2021; Shaules, 2019). Yet, according to Professor Natsuko Shintani (personal communication, January 17, 2020) culture plays a limited role in, for example, the MEXT-approved primary English textbooks series *We Can!* (available at http://wecanenglish.jp/e/). Supporting Shintani's claim are Davidson and Liu's (2020) and Efron's (2020) analyses of primary school textbooks designed to be used in the English classroom in Japan. Both of these studies revealed that textbooks illustrate foreign cultures as being over-simplistic, lacking cultural depth, and containing limited cultural practices and perspectives. Students' superficial engagement with culture may result in bias (Davidson & Liu, 2020; Holliday, 2018), and with English now being an official subject from April 2020, the lack of cultural content in Japanese primary school textbooks is concerning. Textbooks require from the teacher a high level of knowledge about the target language in order to deliver lessons, and their focus on the mastery of language appears to be privileged over the development of understanding, empathy, and respect for the beliefs and practices of others. Textbooks are also often limited in their capacity to reveal the depth and complexity of the lives of others and their culture (McConachy, 2018). Butler (2007, 2015) and Machida (2016) found that lack of knowledge about language and culture has left Japanese primary school teachers feeling anxious about their ability to teach English in their classrooms.

One solution is for Japanese teachers to work with alternative pedagogical resources that offer greater insights into the real lives and experiences of others, but without the demands on accuracy in the language. Davidson (2019) provides several practical ideas to foster cultural learning, understanding, and communication of Japanese students in Grades 5 and 6.

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Supplementing existing textbooks with, for example, authentic materials, such as YouTube clips and visuals (e.g., photos, drawings, dialogues), enable students to make comparisons between cultures. Students could also be asked to keep a notebook in Japanese and English to record their thoughts and views about cultural topics, while local engagement of students with foreigners such as assistant language teachers working at primary schools should be encouraged. Explicit classroom discussions between the teacher and students about cultural issues and experiences are also believed to be an effective means; however, as Davidson points out, the purpose of these class discussions should not be to reach a class consensus but rather an exchange of multiple perspectives. Furthermore, "even simple exposure to pictorial or textual representations of different cultural practices can provide a stimulus for students to inquire into different ways of experiencing daily life and seeing the world" (p.91).

Considering this last suggestion, a text rich in visual resources such as illustrations and photographs, and with limited unfamiliar print could reduce the linguistic burden on primary school teachers and their students while still providing opportunities to engage with the cultures and lives of other people. As such, this study utilized an Australian almost wordless picture book, *Mirror* by celebrated Australian children's author, Jeannie Baker (2010). *Mirror* is a story told through collage about the lives of two families from two cultures (Morocco and Australia). At the onset of the study, we speculated that an almost wordless picture book with its focus on cultural elements could be an effective means to foster young learners' cultural awareness as it may allow learners to create meaning by comparing foreign cultures while drawing on their existing cultural experiences (Holliday, 2018). The purpose of the study was, therefore, to follow Davidson's (2019) suggestion and investigate the hypothesis that picture books may act for children as windows into the lives and practices of others and, that through their viewing of images, Japanese children can develop cultural awareness. We also wanted to explore this particular issue in relation to the complexity of interpreting images and taking them from a specific cultural context and connecting them to one's own knowledge and understanding to build awareness. Accordingly, the study comprised an examination of the ways Japanese primary school students independently interpret, discuss, and respond to an almost wordless picture book that conveys the lives of people from cultures other than their own. Capturing the children's interpretations of stories during the process of creating meaning was expected to provide insights into the children's existing and developing cultural awareness, and, subsequently, lead to implications for pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies relevant to English teaching at primary school level in Japan. The following overarching research question guided the study:

- How do Japanese primary school children view and interpret an almost wordless picture book about a culture other than their own?

4. Methodology

To examine Japanese primary school students' interpretations and meaning-making process while they are independently viewing an almost wordless picture book, we triangulated observations of an independent reading phase, semi-structured interviews, and an independent response/discussion phase.

4.1 Text selection

Jeannie Baker is a well-established, prize-winning Australian children's author and artist whose books are used extensively in Australian schools, both during independent and teacher-directed literacy learning time. One of Baker's most famous books, *Mirror* (2010), contains two almost wordless picture books joined at the spine inside a single cover. Each picture book conveys through collage the daily stories of one Australian and one Moroccan family. *Mirror* aligns the stories side by side, one to view from left to right and the other from right to left. The reader (or viewer), then, is invited to view the stories simultaneously. Each story begins with two sets of single image pages then two sets of eight double page collages portraying sequential images. The stories are conveyed through a series of Baker's trademark collages, some take close up and others longer perspectives on the events of each family's day.

The text on the left tells the Australian story where characters residing in one of Sydney's busy inner city suburbs live amidst a home renovation. The story on the right conveys the daily life of an Arabic family who lead a traditional lifestyle in a remote rural region of Morocco. A male child in each family carries the storyline as they accompany their father over a single day.

Peritextual content comprises two sets of three single print based pages. The first explains, 'The Western and Moroccan stories in this book are designed to be viewed side by side.' That is, the first page on the left opens to the Australian story while the right begins the Moroccan story, and so on. Apart from some simple text embedded within some collages (in English on both sides of the book), the introductions of the stories and an afterword represent almost the entirety of the print. The reader is positioned in the introduction to understand the similarities between the stories:

> There are two boys and two families in this book. One family lives in a city in
> Australia and one lives in Morocco, North Africa. The lives of the two boys and
> their families look very different from each other and they are different. But some
> things connect them ... just as some things are the same for all families no matter
> where they live.

The afterword is even more explicit in expressing an intended message in *Mirror,*

> ... outward appearances may be very different but the inner person of a 'stranger'
> may not be a stranger at all ... Inwardly we are so alike, it could be each other we
> see when we look in a mirror.

Previous research has explored the interpretation of *Mirror* by children living in Australia (Mantei & Kervin, 2014, 2015) and therefore our goal was to examine the use of the text by children neither from Australia or Morocco. We deliberately chose Japanese children and expected to gain new insights into the way these children respond to this almost wordless picture book as a window into the lives of young learners positioned in a relatively mono-cultural context.

4.2 Participants

The participants in the present study were six primary school Japanese children (10-11 years old) in Grade 5, studying at the same local primary school in northern Osaka, Japan. As the research was conducted outside of school hours, the children were selected based on their interest and availability to participate. It should also be noted that the children were friends with the first author's son and that social connection most likely contributed to their interest in taking part in the study voluntarily.

Following parental consent, the children were invited into the home of the first author's parents-in-law, with the children working in friendship pairs and the researcher (i.e., first author)

and his Japanese wife being present in the same room. His wife was there to help with translation and ensure smooth communication in Japanese between the children and the researcher. Two pairs were boys (Taiki and Kentaro; Junichi and Koiichi) and two girls made up the third pair (Misato and Yukari). Each pair worked with the researcher (and his wife) on one occasion for approximately one hour.

4.3 Data collection

The research project was designed with the intention of gathering children's independent interpretations of *Mirror* through a series of child-focused activities captured by the research team. Observations of these interpretations then became the focus of discussion during semi-structured interviews. Chambers' (1994) 'Tell Me' framework informed the design of the semi-structured interview for probing the children's interpretations of the text, their enthusiasm, things that puzzle them, and the connections they make. As an established interview protocol, 'Tell Me' offers opportunities to prompt rather than interrogate readers with the view that they may be more inclined to share and elaborate on their understandings in the more informal setting the framework creates (Bromley, 2001; Ryan & Anstey, 2003). Further, it allows children's voices to be heard without interruption from a teacher (or researcher), potentially offering important insights into their independent meaning making processes. Examples of 'Tell Me' prompts in this study included (Mantei & Kervin, 2014):

- Tell me about anything you liked or disliked about this book.
  - What especially caught your attention?
- Tell me about anything that puzzled you.
  - Are there any questions you would like to ask?
  - Was there anything that took you by surprise?
- Tell me about the patterns, about the connections you noticed in these stories.
  - Has anything that happens in this book happened to you?
- Tell me about the ways it was the same or different for you.
  - Which parts seem to be the most true to life?
  - Are there parts that are not believable for you?
  - Did the book make you think differently about your own experiences?
  - Did this story leave you with any questions about your own experiences, or of others?

While the same series of activities was used with each pair, the activities were somewhat modified to fit with the participants' constraints related to their time and availability. The project protocol was followed with the study participants over a single meeting of approximately one hour and included (1) independent viewing; (2) a semi-structured interview; and (3) and an independent response.

Independent viewing: Pairs were invited to sit side by side on the floor in order to view and talk about *Mirror* together. They were using a single copy of the text, placed in front of them. No time limit or guidance was provided by the researcher about the viewing process or the picture books' content (thus the label 'independent'). To capture the children's interactions between themselves and the picture book and each other, including their meaning-making processes, they were asked to say out loud (in Japanese) whatever came to their mind when viewing the two stories. This independent viewing (aloud) phase was audio and video recorded. An Olympus VN-712PC

audio recorder was placed in front of the children, while a Canon VIXIA HF R21 video camera was positioned on a tripod, slightly elevated and behind the children. Videoing them from behind was done to capture their interactions without giving them the impression of being filmed and watched.

Semi-structured interview: Following the independent phase, the first author's wife interviewed each pair in Japanese, with the children responding in Japanese. Audio recordings were used to capture children' verbal responses and the connections they made to *Mirror*.

Independent response and discussion: After the semi-structured interview, the children were invited to express a personal connection to the text with paper and colored pencils in response to the request to 'draw something in your own life that this book makes you think about'. The children were given approximately 20 minutes, but no further requirements were expressed about expectations for a child's response. The first author did, of course, interact with and respond to the children as invited. The pairs were then engaged in a final discussion with the researcher to share their design, connect with the story, and respond to queries related to understanding the children's creation. All of the discussion took place in Japanese, and as in the previous phases, the researcher's Japanese wife was present in the room to translate if needed. The children's artworks were photographed and discussions were captured via audio recording. Table 1 summarizes each pair's interactions across the research protocol at the site reported in this paper.

Table 1. Pairs' engagement with the research protocol

	Independent Viewing	Semi-structured Interview	Independent Response	
			Text Creation	Discussion
Pair 1 Taiki & Kentaro	6:09 minutes	11:28 minutes	20:00 minutes	9:57 minutes
Pair 2 Junichi & Koiichi	9:17 minutes	17:05 minutes	20:00 minutes	6:27 minutes
Pair 3 Misato & Yukari	11:55 minutes	15:14 minutes	20:00 minutes	9:35 minutes

4.4 Data analysis

The audio recorded qualitative data derived from the independent viewing phase, semi-structured interviews, and independent response and discussion stage, were transcribed and translated by a Japanese research assistant. The first author then coded the data inductively. Reflecting grounded theory principles (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010), each transcript was initially read several times. As themes were discovered, a list of codes representing the themes was created in a separate Word document. This list gradually grew as the transcripts were re-read multiple times during the data analysis process. As a means of providing further insights, the list was also compared with the children's drawings they produced in the independent response phase of the study. Upon the completion of the data analysis, the themes and insights were shared with the second and third authors to refine understandings about the phenomenon under investigation and to establish coder agreement (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

5. Findings

The findings shared here respond to the research question focused on these children's viewing practices and the meanings they took from the text. Each pair of participants was observed using a detailed viewing approach as they worked to make sense of this new book. Yet, while each pair viewed the stories closely to develop their understandings, their viewing pathways differed.[1] In their initial attempt to make sense of this unfamiliar text, Pairs 1 (Taiki and Kentaro) and 2 (Junichi and Koiichi) began viewing the left side, the story of the Sydney family. Pairs 1 and 2 began with the first page in the Sydney story and viewed page by page. Once done, they moved to the right side, the Moroccan story. On finishing the book, Pair 2 said they had never seen this kind of book, and expressed uncertainty about how to view *Mirror*. Junichi thought that they "should have looked at [the Moroccan] side first" to better understand the book.

Misato and Yukari (Pair 3) also began by exploring the Sydney story. They skipped through the pages faster than the previous two pairs, but after 2:38 minutes of viewing the Sydney story, they decided to open both sides so they could view the stories side by side. Rather than adopting the systematic linear approach of Pairs 1 and 2, Pair 3 flipped back and forth and returned several times to the beginning pages in both stories.

By working together, the pairs were able to identify common themes within and across the two stories. For example, Pair 1 noticed that a piece of cloth appeared in both stories. Taiki and Kentaro proposed that the stories were about making cloths in Morocco, which were then sold in Sydney. In another example, Pair 2 identified a large "Go" sign in the Sydney story. This sign appeared on several pages and, as the following excerpt shows, it seemed to facilitate their ability to make connections within the Australian part of the book.

> J: Let's move on…A dinosaur! Cool! A dinosaur is standing! Wait…it says "GO"
> again. Wow! The "Go" sign is the one we saw on the previous page, isn't it?
> K: Are we going back to see it?
> J: Where? Where is "GO"?
> K: Probably the next page?
> J: See? There is "Go"! They are coming back to the same place.
> K: They are coming back, aren't they?
> J: Wait.
> K: After shopping…
> J: See? It's the same "GO"!
> K: They have come back after shopping, haven't they?
> J: Yes, you are right. They have finished shopping and then… Wait a minute. I am
> sure there was no dinosaur at the "GO" sign before.

In addition to the sign, Pair 2 also recognized a colorful carpet that was included in both of the stories. Similar to Pair 1, Junichi and Koiichi believed that the carpet was made in Morocco and sold in Sydney. Although Pair 3 was not focused on how products were produced and sold across the two stories, Misato and Yukari identified several items that occurred in both stories: a flower, a carpet, and electrical appliances. The following excerpt illustrates the girls noticing of an electrical appliance appearing several times in the Moroccan story:

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[1] This study is exploratory in nature and therefore addressing the reasons for why these pathways differed is beyond the scope of the paper.

M: Is this a home electric appliance? Did they buy it? Look back at the first picture.
Look! There were no home electric appliances, but now they got one.
Y: Right.
M: They are becoming modernised little by little.
Y: Modernised!

Shortly awards, Misato observed that "[t]his side (the Moroccan story) is getting more and more modernized, and this side (the Sydney story) is changing into the old times." It seems that the children drew upon items placed in both stories to identify commonalities between the lives of the characters featured in the two stories.

Exploring and identifying items and events placed by the author across both stories prompted the children to identify differences and similarities between them. For example Taiki (Pair 1) thought that one piece of cloth created two stories with two different lifestyles, allowing the viewer to compare differences between the stories: "One piece of cloth splits into the two different stories…Including them in the same book, this might sound strange, but we could compare differences…like two stories." As such, Taiki and Kentaro believed that the purpose of having two separate sections in the book was to help the viewer identify and compare differences between the two stories.

Misato and Yukari (Pair 3), on the other hand, described the life in Morocco as "harsh", "quiet", "darker", "peaceful", and "not crowded", whereas Sydney was perceived to be "noisy", "cluttered", "brighter at night", and "fun". Preparing breakfast in Morocco was viewed as troublesome and time-consuming, and the shops in Morocco were seen as being different than the shops in Sydney. Misato and Yukari also expressed their surprise about the effort required to go shopping in Morocco and about the different goods sold in the two stories. Yukari explained that her drawing (see Figure 1) illustrated the fact that shopping by horse "takes two days for [the Moroccans] to travel forth and back", whereas for the people in Sydney "it takes less than one hour for them to travel back and forth" by car. These close observations about travel and shopping led Pair 3 to notice similarities in the lives of the main characters across the families in both stories.
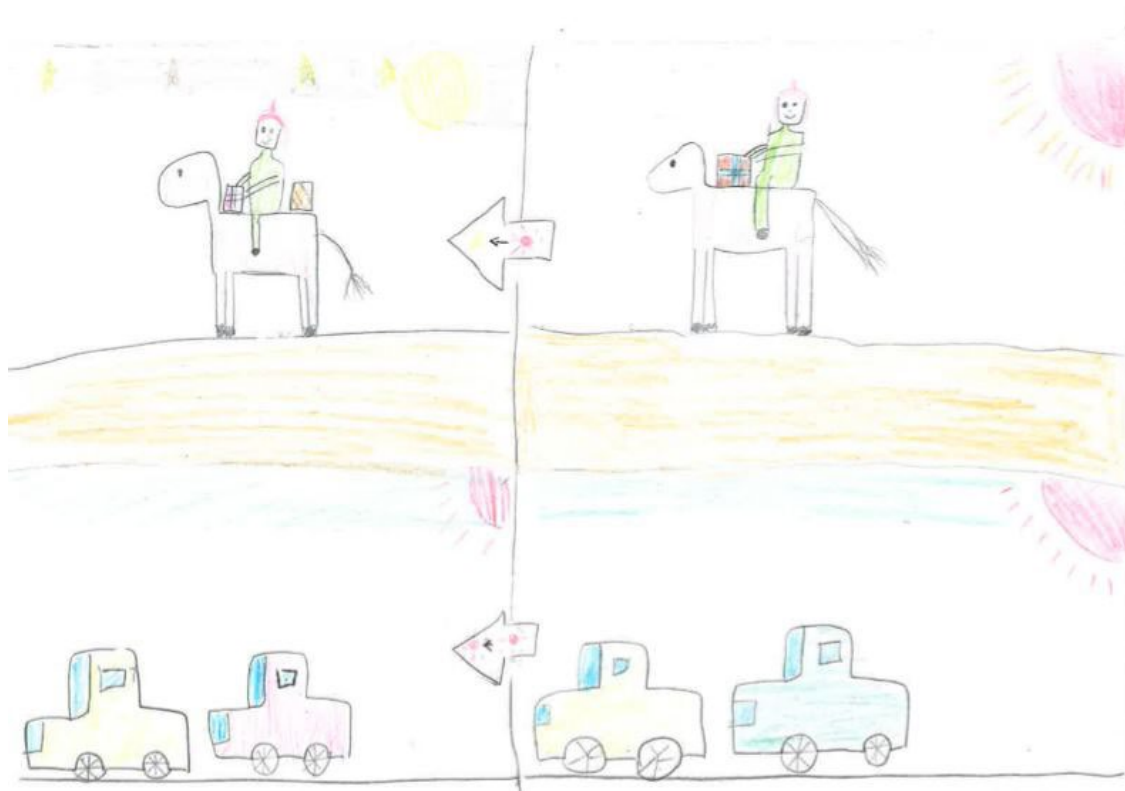
Figure 1. Yukari's drawing.

As this viewing process evolved, without prompting the children began connecting the stories to their own everyday lives and personal experiences. Taiki (Pair 1) expressed that the most memorable part of the book was how the Moroccan house differed in comparison to his house in Japan while Kentaro contrasted the bare Moroccan mountains with the "Japanese mountains [that] are full of nature." Pair 2 compared the hardware store in Sydney to COSTCO, a large American retail store increasingly prevalent in Japan. Junichi expressed surprise at seeing yellow and purple cars in Sydney because "normally [cars] are black or white" in Japan, while Koiichi observed that the Moroccan desert somewhat resembled the Tottori Sand Dunes, the only natural sand dunes in Japan located in the Western part of the country.

Through their interpretations of the stories in *Mirror*, all children expressed a sense that life was more challenging in Morocco than in Sydney. Pair 1 observed that Japanese go to work, whereas Moroccans make and sell things. Taiki (Pair 1) preferred the Sydney story because it was "based on the real lifestyle" and showed "a more pleasant atmosphere." Similarly, Junichi (Pair 2) perceived Morocco to be "like a foreign version of an ordinary life, but this one (Sydney) is so urbanized." Koiichi added that "This side (Sydney) is the real world and the other one is like Minecraft", and both children perceived Sydney to be "safer." Moreover, Moroccans were believed to grow food themselves which was "too much work" (Junichi) and the country was hot without any distinct seasons (Japan has four seasons). Yet, the scenes at the Moroccan marketplace and the appearance of some technology signaled for Pair 3 the potential for change. Misato and Yukari observed an impending modernization in Morocco and compared it with the modernization of Japan during the Showa era in the 1920s. When talking about her drawing (see Figure 2), Misato expressed the belief that the Moroccan's acquisition of electrical appliances and computer games

was helping the local people move away from their harsh life towards the lifestyle of the Sydney family.

Figure 2. Misato's drawing.

With the printed text limited mostly to the endpages and cover, the children were left to view the images in each story. Pair 2 explained that they found the book interesting because having no text fostered their imagination. Koiichi believed "the author [was] testing [their] imagination" and "want[ed them] to feel many things." Similarly, Misato (Pair 3) suggested that having no words facilitated discovery: "We can compare the lifestyles in two countries, and as it does not have words, we can discover things that words alone cannot deliver, such as how people in this country spend a day." While Yukari perceived an almost wordless book to be advantageous because a viewer "can create [their] own stories freely, so anyone can read this book", Misato explained that every time she viewed "those stories would be a little different. So, in this way, I can discover different angles and find them interesting." It seems that the children appreciated the opportunity to work with images from cultures other than their own as a way to explore their understandings. At the same time, the children's perceptions support W. Baker's (2012) suggestion that "[c]onceptions of [cultural awareness] also stress the need for learners to become aware of the culturally based norms, beliefs, and behaviours of their own culture and other cultures" (p. 65).

6. Discussion

In discussing the findings, we return to our research question: *How do Japanese primary school children view and interpret an almost wordless picture book about a culture other than their own?* The children in this study initially applied a detailed viewing approach that enabled them to make connections within and across the stories. This led to the identification of differences and similarities between the two stories in the wordless picture book, as well as to connections of various aspects in the two stories to the children's own familiar context. The findings suggest that

these children held a range of understandings and misunderstandings about cultures other than their own, unsurprising given their age and therefore limited life experience (Short & Thomas, 2011). The Australian characters' activities and behaviors reflecting close alignment with the children's own lives offered logical meanings for the children, while the traditional life of the Moroccan family conveyed in *Mirror* was less familiar, hence harder to relate to.

While the children developed their understandings by drawing on culturally familiar resources and personal experiences, references to their own Japanese context were often made by focusing on differences between familiar and unfamiliar scenes (Sowa, 2014). These interpretations could relate to the act of carefully viewing the images in *Mirror*, as Rosenblatt (1982) suggests "it may be that the particular experience or preoccupations the child brings to the spoken or printed text permit some one part to come most intensely alive" (p. 272). However, it is important to consider the role that the resource plays in the ways our participating Japanese children developed their understandings. Indeed, a resource like *Mirror* may lead to racial stereotyping due to the book's oversimplified portrayal of the two cultures (Amerian & Tajabadi, 2020; Davidson & Liu, 2020; Flanagan, 2013). The data in this study could certainly demonstrate that possibility. Sydney was perceived as being the real world, and Pair 2 felt that in the Moroccan story, "[t]here are so many strange things." Junichi and Koiichi thought that the women covering their faces were homeless. The two also thought that marijuana (rather than tea leaves) was sold at the Moroccan market, and Misato and Yukari (Pair 3) believed that Moroccans lived in caves or holes in the ground. Clearly, texts are not neutral and they are interpreted within the lived experiences and personal histories of the reader (or viewer), which in the case of children is limited (Hoffman, 2010). In their immediate connections to the stories, the children drew on the Sydney family, possibly because their affluent lifestyle mirrored their own, and so they were able to look beyond the literal information and showed evidence of deep interpretative engagement with the culture and lifestyles presented in the book.

The findings here support the concept that the learners' existing background, identity, knowledge, culture, and mother tongue all play critical roles in the cultural learning process (Comber, 2015; Holliday, 2018). The findings also support the proposition that learners' familiarity with the context helps comprehension and learning and leads to the creation of new experiences and meaning (Canagarajah, 2016; Rosenblatt, 1982). Thus, an almost wordless picture book with one side of the story taking place in Japan and the second half containing a story occurring in a less familiar country or culture would likely be an effective means to foster Japanese children's cultural understanding. This is particularly relevant in light of MEXT's most recent emphasis on enhancing students' cultural awareness in the primary school classroom (Keirinkan, 2017; MEXT, 2017).

6.1 Pedagogical implications

Our findings suggest that wordless picture books could offer rich territory for teachers to begin fostering Japanese primary school children's cultural awareness in English classes. As an alternative teaching strategy and resource that supplements existing primary school textbooks (Kiss & Weninger, 2017), an almost wordless picture book does not require the teacher to possess English proficiency in order to foster students' cultural awareness. This is significant given that the majority of primary school teachers in Japan possess limited, if any, English proficiency. The fact that English instruction has been mandatory in Grades 5 and 6 since 2020 (Butler, 2021; MEXT, 2014) causes considerably anxiety among Japanese practitioners (see, for example, Butler, 2007; Machida, 2016). Using resources where messages are conveyed through modes other than print would therefore reduce the burden on teachers and students, yet still allow them to include certain

cultural aspects about foreign countries in their English lessons. Interestingly, it seems the children in this study appreciated the possibilities. Misato and Yukari pointed out that "this book does not have words; we can create our own stories freely, [and] so anyone can read this book." Limited written text enabled the children to imagine and discover things that in turn contributed to their meaning-making process.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that some simple target vocabulary in English could be taught once this discovery phase is completed. Learning new words is important because the acquisition of vocabulary has long been viewed as an integral part of learning an additional language (Nation, 2013). Classroom discussions (Butler, 2019b; Davidson, 2019) and shared viewing and reading with the teacher co-constructing a narrative with the students around the stories in *Mirror* could be an effective way for teachers to introduce simple English vocabulary and perhaps even integrate some simple grammatical forms, possibly in conjunction with the main textbook that is being used in the classroom. If the teacher lacks proficiency, the co-construction of this narrative as well as the introduction and explanation of new English words could, of course, be done in Japanese (Butler, 2019b), leading to the learners' as well as the teacher's gradual English language development. The idea is that this "[l]anguage [use] becomes a site in which intercultural mediation occurs through processes of noticing differences, establishing comparisons and reflecting on the consequentiality of difference and, in the case of mediation for others, this is accomplished through interaction" (Liddicoat, 2014, p. 275). Teachers also need to keep in mind that language must be comprehensible to young learners and therefore simple words and sentences should be "simultaneously linked to actions and gestures" (Nguyen, 2021, p. 17) to enhance the acquisition process. Thus, as a follow-up, the children could act the stories out with the teacher narrating the stories in Japanese while providing key vocabulary and sentences in English. Research has shown that the combination of physical movement and bilingual story telling creates a rich learning environment that fosters Japanese primary school students' English language development (Burri, 2018).

While resources that are authentic reflections of communities across the world offer important opportunities for teachers to affirm, challenge, explore, and enrich the connections children make, no single text can capture the complexity of an entire culture. Also, whether this means that *Mirror* is appropriate to be used in any cultural context is beyond the scope of the discussion, but it may provide an interesting alternative resource to FL teaching to young learners.

In this study, *Mirror* presented as a 'way in' to talking about and exploring cultures other than one's own. In a relatively mono-cultural country like Japan, opportunities to explore understandings and misconceptions about others seems particularly important as Japanese children have few opportunities to experience foreign cultures. It is worth noting that the lives presented in a picture book also represent the author's biases and experiences and therefore the role of the teachers is critical in helping the learners interpret the text and mitigating prejudices. Teaching through the children's initial mis/understandings as revealed in *Mirror* also requires teachers themselves to have some degree of understanding of different cultures, but it also offers opportunities for teachers and students to operate as co-learners exploring common concepts together. From an initial viewing of a resource such as *Mirror*, teachers and students could pursue a range of other text types that could offer new insights into their cultural understandings and, at the same time, enhance the students' English language learning process. The provision of additional texts may be especially important for primary school students in Japan as Japanese students in English education often lack English input. As such, following the use of a wordless picture book to help raise students' cultural awareness and learn some key vocabulary and basic grammatical features, their teacher could play short and simple audio recordings or YouTube clips

in English (as suggested by Davidson, 2019) on the same topic as the one featured in the wordless picture book. In this way, students are provided with English input and repeated exposure to target vocabulary (Butler, 2019b), previously learned language is recycled, and the focus begins to shift from form to meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). Since Japanese primary school students are taught to read simple texts in fifth and sixth grade, this input phase could also be followed by having the students read short texts featuring the same topic as the wordless picture book and audio clips. Supplementing these resources with additional reading texts would not only contribute to the students' language learning process, but provide additional opportunities for classroom discussions and comparisons of cultural issues, further contributing to the enhancement of Japanese students' cultural awareness.

In Australia, *Mirror* is recommended as a resource for fostering cultural understanding (BOS, 2012). But the findings shared here suggest that simply giving the book to students is not sufficient to foster cultural awareness, sensitivity, or empathy in Japanese primary school students. Giving the book to students does allow for meaning-making to occur, but it is only through time engaged with the text, and the opportunities to interact with others that deep understandings can grow. Thus, pedagogies for fostering cultural awareness must look to challenge children's stereotypes and superficial interpretations. An initial extended independent viewing and meaning-making episode offers teachers opportunities to understand the existing knowledge and misunderstandings of their students. These can then be addressed through inquiry with peers and the teacher using a range of appropriate texts and other sources that can develop new, more accurate accounts. Within this inquiry frame, explicit teaching alongside extended periods for students' independent production of their own texts could afford strong connections to students' own lives, experiences, and contexts. It is through these processes that greater understandings and empathy are grown (Comber, 2015; Holliday, 2018; Short & Thomas, 2011).

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that the Japanese learners made a number of cultural comparisons within and across the two stories, and then related to what they saw in the book to their own lives. The data also suggested that, because of the complexity of building cultural awareness, without appropriate teacher guidance, these processes may eventually reinforce stereotypes. We acknowledge that a replication of this study could reveal different findings if it were carried out by a Japanese researcher. Also, a future study should replicate this study in the context of a Japanese primary school classroom and with Japanese primary school teachers, not least so as to evaluate the feasibility and practicality of the use of almost wordless picture books in actual classroom settings in Japan.

As a small qualitative study, the researchers' aim was to develop initial understandings about the ways a group of children responded to an almost wordless picture book that represented stories from cultures other than their own. Rather than looking to generalise the findings, the research sought in-depth responses from the participants that could inform future research focus and design. A broader study informed by these early findings could include a larger sample size and examine the differences among participants' use of a wordless picture book and subsequent cultural awareness based on gender and socio-economic status. Nonetheless, we believe that this research project revealed some valuable insights into the practices and meaning-making processes of Japanese primary school students as they engaged with a rich resource conveying stories about families from cultures other than their own. It may also offer a starting point for teaching cultural

awareness in English classes at Japanese primary schools. In a climate of increasing globalization and the need for greater understandings about and empathy for others, pedagogies that can challenge students' misunderstandings and promote more sophisticated and nuanced understandings are required.

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