

Fūdo in Foreign Language Learning in Japan and Finland: An Autoethnographic Study of a PhD Journey

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Abstract

While the Japanese education system and policy have been studied extensively, Japanese philosophy and thoughts have rarely served as a theoretical and methodological resource in the field of comparative and international education. Resonating with a current scholarly attempt to explore the possibilities and limitations of using Japan as an epistemic resource, I have experimented with drawing upon Japanese philosophical thinking, namely Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889-1960) comparative phenomenological study, to analyse the current foreign language education reforms in Japan. In this paper, I tell the story of my thought experiment in which I explore autoethnographically how my epistemic mindset has changed during my PhD journey through a slow dialogue with Watsuji's study on milieu, relationality and ontological inquiry into human beings. Aiming to multiply the epistemological resources for educational research, I analyse reflexively the way in which I was destabilised by Japanese philosophy in (un)learning educational practices in Japanese contexts. In so doing, I explore how 'foreign' educational comparativists might be able to move beyond the storyteller role in foreign contexts or the expert role in home contexts and, accordingly, contribute to promoting a pluralistic knowledge production.

Keywords: comparative and international education; knowledge production; policy transfer; Watsuji Tetsurō

Introduction

In the field of educational research in general, and comparative and international education in particular, Japan has been extensively studied in terms of prominent reference societies in Asia (see Santos

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and Centeno 2021), a point of comparison (e.g. Takayama 2012; Takeda and Williams 2008) and a comparative link in global educational governance (e.g. Willis and Rappleye 2011; Yonezawa et al. 2018). While the Japanese education system and policy have been studied extensively, Japanese philosophy and thoughts have rarely served as a theoretical and methodological resource for educational research in the large body of international English-language literature. To put it differently, Japan has been a data source or an ‘empirical other’ where ‘theories are applied, revised or domesticated’ (Takayama 2019: 147) rather than an ‘epistemic other’ that provides a source of new theoretical insights and develops alternative theories (ibid.:153). A group of scholars recently explored the possibility of using Japan as an epistemic resource in conducting comparative education, aiming to multiply the epistemological framework to study and highlight the more pluralistic worldview in education (e.g. Hayashi 2021; Komatsu and Rappleye 2017; Rappleye 2020; Takayama 2020).

Resonating with this recent scholarly attempt, I have experimented with the use of Japanese philosophical thinking, namely Watsuji Tetsurō’s (1889-1960) comparative phenomenological study in examining the current foreign language education reforms in Japan. In this paper, I explore autoethnographically how my epistemic mindset has changed during my PhD journey through a slow dialogue with Watsuji’s study on milieu, relationality and ontological inquiry into human beings. Aiming to increase the epistemological resources for educational research, I tell the story of my thought experiment in which I was destabilised by Japanese philosophy in (un)learning educational practices in the Japanese contexts.

I took a particular interest in Watsuji among other prominent Japanese scholars, such as Nishida Kitarō, Kuki Shūzō and Minakata Kumagusu, as Watsuji’s phenomenological comparative approach addresses a current scholarly need in comparative and international education. Recently, educational comparativists have utilised their biography or lived experiences of visiting or living in a foreign country, aiming to extend the ways of academic knowledge production (see Kim 2020). For instance, scholars have attempted to go beyond the foreign researcher’s role as a storyteller of a system abroad or an expert in their home context (Takayama 2011; Unterhalter 2020). Scholars have argued that it is not enough for travelling researchers with experiences of sojourn to bring the implications and lessons ‘home’ to those who lack experience abroad to improve the home system. It is also not

enough for foreign researchers to provide ‘authentic’ information as local experts. Instead, researchers living within transnational mobility are required to proactively participate in knowledge production by not only comparing the home system and foreign systems but also reflexively analysing their own lived experiences (see Kim 2020). I perceive an inherent potential in Watsuji’s phenomenological comparative study that enables comparativists to expand the epistemological potential of comparative educational research by other means. In this paper, engaging in autoethnography, I explore how foreign educational comparativists could further contribute to promoting a pluralistic knowledge production, going beyond the role of itinerant storytellers or foreign experts.

It is worth mentioning here that Watsuji is just one example with which to start a thought experiment toward enriching the ‘frames of references’ (Chen 2010) for educational research. I do not argue that Watsuji is the best option to proliferate frames of reference adopting Japan as the epistemic other.¹ I acknowledge that using Watsuji as an alternative reference entails a risk of promoting cultural essentialism that categorises people within a distinct, fixed and unchangeable ‘culture’ and being labelled as a nationalistic and conservative educational researcher (see Lafleur 1996).² However, given these risks and the limitation of using Watsuji, this study attempts to start from scratch and explores the possibility of salvaging Watsuji’s art of phenomenological comparison from the nationalistic and essentialist nature that was used for Japanese fascism during the Asia-Pacific War. In this regard, this paper does not primarily aim to proclaim the conceptual and theoretical effectiveness of Watsuji in terms of comparative educational research. Rather, it calls on researcher colleagues to engage in further discussion on the use of Japanese philosophy as an ‘epistemic other’ in general – not limited to Watsuji but also extending to other Japanese thinkers and Shinto cosmology, among others (e.g. see Jensen and Blok 2013; Jensen, Ishii and Swift 2016; Takayama 2020) – toward increasing the epistemic resources for social studies.

In sum, this paper attempts to raise a question among readers, especially those who work on Japan-related topics, on the possibilities, limitations and pitfalls of knowledge production projects that adapt a conceptual ‘insertion’ from Japanese philosophy. The nature of this paper is thus experimental: it ultimately aims to open a space for fruitful discussions between researchers living in our own scholarly

community so that we can find a new way of collaboration between Japanese studies and the wider disciplines in social studies such as education.³

Policy Transfer and Foreign Language Education Reform in Japan

In this paper, I reflect autoethnographically on how my epistemological perspective has changed during the course of my PhD journey while revisiting my familiar research topic through the lens of Watsuji. In the following, I briefly introduce the topic and the initial research ideas of my ongoing doctoral dissertation.

In 2018, I commenced my doctoral studies on policy transfer, taking Japan as an empirical case to examine how the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (hereafter CEFR) was adapted to foreign language education reforms in the non-European context. The CEFR is one of the global education policies in language education which exerts ‘unquestionable influence’ (Figueras 2012: 477) on language learning, teaching and assessment in Europe and beyond (Byram and Parmenter 2012). Japan is one of the countries where the CEFR has been increasingly adapted to educational reform projects at the national and institutional levels to shift the ‘old’ grammar- and translation-oriented pedagogy to ‘modern’ communicative language teaching (Nishimura-Sahi 2020).

In the initial dissertation writing stage, I was interested in analysing why and how Japan ‘failed’ to borrow the CEFR in the reform of foreign language education. In retrospect, I had taken for granted a prolonged criticism of foreign language education in Japan that assumes it as a failing system and thus one to be improved and modernised. Since the late 1980s, effective communicative language teaching – particularly English language teaching – has been on the national policy agenda in Japan, based on an understanding that the international economic competitiveness of the country can be enhanced by improving the English language proficiency of Japanese people (Erikawa 2018; Kubota 2018). Despite persistent efforts by the government, particularly the Ministry of Education, and the demands of the business sector for cultivating communicative English language proficiency since the 1980s (see Erikawa 2018), post-war English language teaching in Japan has been often perceived as a ‘failure’ due to the low level of English proficiency of a large group of Japanese people (see Aspinnall 2013;

Horiguchi, Imoto and Poole 2015). Seeking a solution to this educational and political challenge, researchers of comparative education have studied foreign language education policies, systems and curricula in different countries to learn from successful cases elsewhere, for instance, Finland (see e.g. Imai 2020; Ito 2014; Yonezaki 2020).

In the initial phase of my doctoral study, I also attempted to learn from the 'successful' Finnish case of foreign language education, having lived in Finland for over a decade. In addition to the Finnish success in communicative foreign language teaching, I was interested in Finland's foreign language education policy, which upholds the European idea(l)s for language education. The CEFR's primary educational idea(l) or the guiding philosophy (Rappleye, Imoto and Horiguchi 2011) is to respect and promote *plurilingualism*, that is, 'the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner' living in a multilingual society where different languages coexist at the social or individual level (Council of Europe 2020: 30; see also Coste, Moore and Zarate 2009).

In contrast to Finland, in Japan, the CEFR has been adapted largely as a technical reform instrument (Nishimura-Sahi 2020). Scholars problematise how the European ideology of plurilingualism accompanied by the CEFR is not fully reflected in the CEFR-oriented reform of foreign language education in Japan (e.g. Hosokawa and Nishiyama 2010; Torikai 2018). Having followed this scholarly discussion, I was first interested in why and how the European idea(l) of plurilingualism ceased to appear in the course of policy transfer of the CEFR to the Japanese context.

Reading literature attempting to decolonise social thoughts (e.g. Chen 2010; Connell 2007; Mignolo 2011), however, I became dissatisfied with my initial research questions, which were built on the Eurocentric understanding of modernisation and civilisation. I had eventually come to the understanding that I had been taking the liberty of positioning the Japanese system as 'developing' and the European and global education policy as 'advanced', while encouraging the value of progress, improvement and global competency (Silova 2019).

The literature on decolonialism in education motivated me to examine the Japanese case of policy transfer from a different perspective, drawing upon a different epistemological base. Searching for alternative concepts and analytical tools to study the Japanese education system, I started reading Japanese philosophy, including

Watsuji, and, accordingly, I became more interested in exploring how the power of the so-called 'global' is assembled in the course of policy transfer. In this autoethnographic study, I tell an autobiographical story of transformation through dialogues with the 'epistemic other', namely, Watsuji's study on *fūdo* (milieu) and dual characteristic of human existence.

Watsuji's Art of Phenomenological Comparison

Before starting my story of transformation, I will briefly introduce Watsuji's notions of *fūdo* and the dual nature of human existence which destabilised my perspective on the 'unsuccessful' policy transfer and 'failing' foreign language education system in Japan.

Fūdo

In the study on *fūdo*, Watsuji (1991 [1935]) comparatively explored the emergence of cultures, societies and religions in different climatic regions. Taking the three main climate types – monsoon, meadow and desert – as an example, Watsuji described the ways of shaping *fūdo* in each region, by which he meant a socially and historically assembled entity of human beings, artefacts (e.g. architectures, household items and clothing), the social structure (e.g. industrial structure) and the natural environment (Watsuji 1991 [1935]). In his book *Fūdo*, reflecting on his experience of fourteen months' sojourn in Europe, Watsuji attempted to shed new light on 'Japaneseness' or the taken-for-granted tenet of Japanese culture rather than to adapt external European models as a reference to improve the Japanese system. Using his experience of becoming a 'foreign comparativist' (Rappleye 2017), Watsuji revisited the domestic context in comparison to European urban scenes and explored how they have been constructed in time and emerged in the form of artefacts such as urban scenes, architects and living tools.

On his return to Japan at the end of his tour of Europe, Watsuji was made aware of the *mezurashii* (strange and valuable) character of Japan and explored the nature of and the reason for the 'strangeness' (Watsuji 1991 [1935]). He discovered the incongruity or the 'absence of balance' in the imported materials from the West, such as trams and cars. Taking the sense of absence as the starting point of his comparative analysis, Watsuji explored where the strange absence of proportion comes from and continued to reflect on what characterises Japan's modern civilisation. Looking at the layout, function or character and circumstances

of the Japanese house, Watsuji analysed how they involve (and are involved in) the ways of life in Japan, comparing these to what he observed in the European urban scene. Watsuji explained how he (re)discovered *mezurashisa* (strangeness and valuableness) in Japan through a sojourn in Europe as follows:

[T]he normal condition in which I had lived and which I had grown used to seeing through the years remained identical; but there was exposed a much more fundamental condition lying underneath the surface which I had failed to perceive hitherto and which was now interpreted as rare or abnormal in contrast to what I had come to understand previously as normal. (Watsuji 1988: 157)

Watsuji calls our attention to the materiality and explores the complex interplay of human beings, the natural environment and the society in which the environment has shaped our styles of living, architectural styles, house interiors, food culture and *dōgu* (tools) such as technological apparatuses and clothing. Our need for textiles to make clothing and for charcoal to heat our houses causes the charcoal burners to produce charcoal in the mountains and the factories to manufacture textile products. In this way, we come to engage with each other individually and socially through various measures for protecting ourselves from the cold (Watsuji 1988: 5). The status quo of society and cultures is not established by human beings as the subject but has been assembled through the inseparable interconnection with their environment. The entire interrelated network that exercises influence on our individual and social life is what Watsuji means by the concept of *fūdo*.

Watsuji expands his discussion beyond the relationality between human existence to materials, the social structures and the natural environment in *Fūdo*. Watsuji points out that the phenomenon of cold is as much subjective as it is objective in that the cold air does not press upon us from the outside, but we exist out in the cold and discover the feeling of the cold. The experience of feeling the cold is not individual but collective and occurs in relationality because we do not experience the cold 'I' alone but 'we' experience the same cold in common with other people. This can be seen in our exchange of daily greetings in which we talk about the weather (Watsuji 1988: 4). Following the Heideggerian phenomenological approach, Watsuji expanded its analytical eye to spatiality, relationality and social aspects of human existence from individualism and temporality.

The dual nature of human existence

Largely inspired and influenced by Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, Watsuji elaborated his study of the relational nature of human existence with a focus on Japanese terms. Analysing the Japanese term *aidagara* (interconnectedness between people), Watsuji describes a cultural space that consists of interrelations among humans and the ties between humans, materials and their environment (Heisig et al. 2011). Referring to another Japanese word *ningen* (a person, a human being) which literally refers to interspace or the relationship of one person to others, Watsuji explains that we human beings are individuals, but simultaneously, social beings that can only exist in relationality. Human beings have a dual nature as individuals and members of various social groups – such as family, local community and society – and that makes us inevitably social and relational beings.

Pointing out the limitation of individualism that Heidegger's *Dasein* conveys, Watsuji discussed the need to adequately explain 'the vast network of interconnections that serves to make us what we are; individuals inescapably immersed in the space/time of a world, together with others' (Carter 2013: 134). Watsuji points out the need to capture the social, temporal and cultural dimensions of human beings, and, more importantly, the interrelation or interconnectedness between these dimensions. Watsuji's discussion of these Japanese terms touches upon Kuan-Hsing Chen's conception of *translation*, or a 'a long process of negotiation' in which '[t]he object to be translated has to be subjected to existing social forces and must negotiate with dense local histories if it is to take root in foreign soil' (Chen 2010: 244). Watsuji argued that *ningen*, *Anthropos*, *homo*, *man* and *Mensch* refer to the same entity, but that the conceptions or social ontologies underlying these terms are different (Watsuji 2007 [1934]: 20). That is, the ontology of so-called human beings is multiple.

Having introduced Watsuji's notions that enabled me to explore an alternative approach to studying foreign language education, I will now move on to explain my research data and autoethnographical methodology.

Autoethnography

This paper uses my own experiences documented in the form of a diary from January 2015 to December 2021, situating its writing genre in autoethnography (Ellis et al. 2011; Maréchal 2010). Using deep and

careful self-reflection or reflexivity, I explore how my understanding of foreign language education in Japan, European idea(l)s of plurilingualism and successful/ unsuccessful policy transfers changed through reading Watsuji. In so doing, I attempt to illustrate a sense-making process through telling a story about doing research (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2021). I also explore the possibilities and the limitations of using Japanese philosophy in educational research.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that draws upon different scholarly traditions such as autobiography, narrative studies, ethnography and art-based research (Cooper and Lilyea 2022). Autoethnographers reflect their own lived experiences and write stories about the self, placing personal – insider – experiences within the social, cultural and political context. Inviting readers/audiences to engage in the unfolding story of experience and seeking for their responses, autoethnographers offer nuanced and specific knowledge of particular lives rather than general information (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015). While the advantages of autoethnography have been increasingly recognised in academia, the reasons for engaging in autoethnography often vary depending on the researcher (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015). Here, autoethnography is a way of inquiry to challenge norms of research practices and accordingly contribute to a scholarly discussion. Engaging in reflexivity to ‘identify and interrogate the intersections between self and social life’ (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015: 3), I explore how personal experience became imbued with Watsuji’s notions and destabilised my initial perception of Japan’s failing policy transfer.

Fūdo in Foreign Language Learning

A day in Japan

In early summer 2017, I visited my hometown in Southern Osaka with my two sons. During our short stay in Osaka, we spent a busy but enjoyable four weeks with our loved ones. While staying at my parents’ house, my sons attended a local elementary school. On the weekends, we went out to see our relatives and friends. My sons found new interests – such as Nintendo games, Japanese TV programmes and collecting Pokemon cards – while spending time with their cousins and new friends from school. The more time the boys spent together with their Japanese friends, the more they became interested in what others talked about and played with. I felt glad and relieved

that my sons' Japanese language skills improved remarkably during that summer.

Reflecting on this experience in light of Watsuji's study on *fūdo* (milieu), I have come to see the significant role of *dōgu* (tools) in foreign language learning. *Dōgu* or, namely, Nintendo games and Pokemon cards played a crucial role when my sons created and sustained *aidagara* (interconnectedness) with their Japanese friends. These entertainment products served as the crucial tool which brought my sons into the Japanese community. Using these tools required them to acquire Japanese abilities because most games, *anime* and *manga* distributed in Japan are available only in Japanese.

Nintendo games, Pokemon cards, *anime* and *manga* are the products of the vast Japanese games and publishing industry. The large scale of the Japanese industry enables a wide selection of Japanese entertainment contents. For instance, Japan has world-famous game companies such as Nintendo that produce a considerable amount of Japanese-language content targeting Japanese consumers as a matter of course. In Finland, in contrast to Japan, the selection of Finnish-language entertainment for teenagers, such as video games, music and YouTube videos, is rather limited. The small population of Finnish speakers may be the reason why the industry is not willing to produce much content in Finnish language. Much of the entertainment content distributed in Finland is available only in English. Thus, my sons need to be fluent in English so that they can join the conversation on the newly released games and viral TikTok songs and memes. If my boys do not improve their English, they will not be able to enjoy full membership in their community in Finland.

As Watsuji discussed, human beings or *ningen* are individuals but simultaneously social beings. That is, *ningen* can only exist in a relationship or in connection to others. During our stay in Japan, my sons enjoyed playing Nintendo games and Pokemon cards individually, but more importantly, collectively. My sons came to appreciate that to find their place in their Japanese community, Japanese is the 'must-learn' language to connect them to the wider society, to allow them a social existence and to make them exist socially in the new world. A foreign language to be learned was collectively *found* by my sons and their friends rather than imposed by an education policy agenda.

Foreign language proficiency grows in an interconnectedness between people which is sustained by tools such as video games and card games. And these tools are the product of the industrial system that provides

items according to people's needs. There is a continuum of connections between the languages we learn, the tools we use in our everyday lives and the wider societal structure where such tools are manufactured. The *fūdo* of foreign language learning consists of social connectedness, various materials or 'things' (e.g. games, manga comic books) and the wider societal dimensions (e.g. the game and publishing industry).

In this regard, the feasibility of the Japanese Ministry of Education's agenda, including improving the communicative English skills of all the Japanese people, comes into question. Achieving such a policy agenda in the Japanese *fūdo* of foreign language learning would necessitate significant structural changes on various societal dimensions and a fundamental change in our way of life. It seems to me that such a drastic social change would not be welcomed by the majority of the people, and this would thus be rather unfeasible. Instead, looking at the Japanese system 'failing' differently, there emerges an alternative way: that is, to accept the status quo as part of *fūdo* and call for a reconsideration of the progressive reform-oriented discussion on English language teaching in Japan.

As Watsuji discovered the *mezurashii* (strange and valuable) character of Japan through a phenomenological comparison, I also identified another way of understanding the foreign language education system in Japan. The Japanese system is not necessarily a failure, and the Finnish system is not necessarily the 'best practice' of foreign language education. Through the lens of Watsuji's phenomenological comparison, the hierarchical positioning of these two systems could be conceptualised simply as a difference in *fūdo*. Seeking a working educational reform model from elsewhere and imposing it as a policy recommendation to improve the domestic system is not the only contribution by educational comparativists. Our contribution could be to propose an alternative perspective based on our lived experience as itinerant researchers, aiming to break the political discussion currently at an impasse and find a new pathway.

A Day in Finland

Living in Finland, I encounter various languages other than Finnish and Swedish.⁴ For instance, at the shops, I come across Spanish, Italian or French, among others on a daily basis. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, vegetable farming is rather costly during the cold winter, if not impossible. Many colourful vegetables, such as the tomatoes,

cucumbers and paprikas sold in supermarkets are imported in winter-time from southern European countries. A vast selection of cheese and wine is also available at a reasonable price because of EU legislation, such as the treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC), and the developed logistics system that enables cross-national mobility of goods and people.

On the packages of many of these imported groceries, foreign languages – such as English and/or the language of the country of origin – are printed. I also spot multilingual signs printed on the packages of groceries and everyday household items. For instance, when I take a look at the cereal box on my kitchen shelf, there are multilingual signs written in Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. In such a language landscape, Spanish on a bag of leaf lettuce, French on a container of cheese, Italian on a wine bottle and multilingual signs on a cereal box become part of my everyday life.

Consuming these imported goods, I sense a direct connection between myself and the country where the vegetables grow and where the cheese and wine are produced. The sense of connection arouses my interest in learning the languages which I see every day, intertwining with the multilingual landscape surrounding me. It is not only a matter of expanding my language repertoire for practical purposes but of building a new identity as a European citizen: ‘Respecting linguistic and cultural diversity as a new European citizen, I should be able to speak more languages than English and Finnish’. The sense of plurilingualism sinks into my thoughts as being inextricably linked to the sense of belonging to Europe.

It may be difficult to get many people to agree that the presence of several foreign languages printed on commercial products constitutes European plurilingualism. Some would pay no heed to the foreign languages surrounding us. Others would point out that they rarely call an imported product by its foreign name. While foreign words come into one’s view, these words are just there encased in a scenery of mundane moments of life. Nothing more, nothing less. Although the multilingual landscape is nothing special or meaningful to many Europeans, it is quite *mezurashii* (strange and valuable) to me, having been born and brought up in Japan.

At a supermarket in Japan, fresh domestic vegetables and fruits are available regardless of the season. The warm and humid climate enables the production of different kinds of domestic vegetables and fruits such as napa cabbages, mandarin oranges and *shungiku* or

garland chrysanthemum even in winter. There is also a wide selection of groceries imported from elsewhere at some stores in Japan, but most of them are 'Japanised'; that is, the exotic nature of the imported item is erased by re-packaging with Japanese language and adding a sales presentation explaining how to use or 'adapt' the item to the Japanese table. Although many scholars disagree on the conception of Japan as a monolingual society regarding the increasing population who speak a language other than Japanese, the existence of the indigenous Ainu and Ryūkyū languages and the wide variety of dialects (Ostheider 2010; Shōji 2010; Yasuda 2014) spoken in Japanese society, there is only limited exposure to foreign languages in everyday life in Japan.⁵

Thus, I wonder if the sense of *mezurashii* I gained in Finland has enabled me to see the language landscape differently than Europeans do. I see the European language landscape as materialised plurilingualism rather than a set of product information written in foreign languages, compared to the monolingual landscape which I saw in Japan. My foreignness might allow me to find *mezurashisa* in a mundane setting in a European country and to identify a tiny but integral piece which constitutes plurilingualism.

I have always found value in linguistic and cultural diversity in a multicultural society and believed that learning foreign languages enriches our lives not only for its practical benefit, but because it also enables us to learn new concepts that a foreign language contains. I therefore found it problematic that the Japan Ministry of Education borrowed the CEFR without the European idea(l) of plurilingualism. However, in comparing the *fūdo* of foreign language learning in Finland and Japan, I became sceptical about the assumption that plurilingualism can be 'borrowed' and thus should be properly 'adapted' to the Japanese context. I have since come to think of the relevance of the criticism against the ignorance of the European ideology of plurilingualism in the current adaptation of the CEFR to the Japanese system. Given that plurilingualism is formed in a particular *fūdo*, what is the significance of a normative-oriented policy transfer study which aims to examine a better practice of transplanting European plurilingualism into the Japanese context?

Conclusion

This paper explored how my epistemic mindset had become destabilised and transformed during my PhD journey through a conversation with Watsuji. Watsuji's notions of *aidagara* (interconnectedness between

people), *ningen* (a person, a human being) and *fūdo* (milieu) allowed me to find alternatives to normative-oriented policy transfer research which aims to learn from somewhere else and adapt the learned ‘best practices’ to the Japanese system for the sake of improvement. This thought experiment enabled me to reimagine comparative educational research in several ways.

Firstly, given Watsuji’s conception of the dual nature of human beings, I have come to explore language learners not only as individuals but also as social beings who co-construct the environment of language usage. And drawing upon Watsuji’s insight into the materiality and relationality in *fūdo*, I have come to take materials (e.g. groceries, games, TV programmes) and the societal structures (e.g. the culture industry and the climatic conditions) into account in my analysis to describe how they together constitute the *fūdo* of foreign language learning. Taking school education as only one dimension that shapes one’s language proficiency, I have come to think more about the social aspect of language learning and identified a way to study the Japanese case of policy transfer as something other than a case of malfunctioning policy borrowing and educational reform.

Secondly, drawing upon Watsuji’s phenomenological notion of *fūdo*, I have come to think that plurilingualism is essentially not a reform idea that can be ‘borrowed’ from elsewhere to be adapted and implemented in another context. Rather, plurilingualism can be conceptualised as a state of being that emerges in everyday practices in relation to the climatic conditions, the geopolitical settings and one’s own sense of identity. Accordingly, I became uncertain of the significance of a normative-oriented study which critically examines how the idea(l) of plurilingualism ceased to appear in the course of policy transfer.

Watsuji’s notions allowed me to reflect and (un)learn the familiar context and critical approach to Eurocentric progressivism in my epistemic mindset. This thought experiment enabled me to imagine further possibilities of foreign comparativists as comparative autoethnographers with a profound awareness of *mezurashisa* or strangeness. However, I also recognised a limitation or potential pitfall in drawing upon Japanese philosophy for decolonialising knowledge production. Using Japanese philosophy stimulated my unconscious nationalistic sentiments. Such sentiment, on the one hand, has encouraged me to contribute to developing epistemological resources by using otherness in myself from decolonial stand points. On the other hand, it makes a pitfall of thinking and speaking

with an air of superiority that I know what others – Europeans – do not know and I see what others cannot see. Such an epistemic pride or arrogance should be critically and reflexively reflected upon when using our own otherness and foreignness for purposes of analysis. To conclude, I hope that this paper will serve as a modest invitation to researcher colleagues to reflect upon the use of their own biography and knowledge resources developed by the ‘epistemic other’, aiming at a pluriverse of epistemic resources.

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NOTES

- 1 Neither do I see Watsuji as the representative of Japanese thinkers embodying Japaneseness or praising Japanese indigenous knowledge. Rather, I see Watsuji’s notions – such as *fūdo* and *aidagara* – as eclectic knowledge. Watsuji’s dialogue with Heidegger and other Western thinkers is based on his wide and informed reading in the classics of Asia such as early Indian Buddhism, Confucianism and many of the prominent works in sociology and ethnology of his time (Carter 1996).
- 2 There is one major issue about Watsuji’s discussion that has been criticised by researchers of Japanese philosophy. Watsuji seemed problematic or ‘irrelevant’ (Lafleur 1996: viii) to Japanese intellectuals for his ‘cultural conservatism’ (ibid.) and contribution to the rise of Japanese fascism during the Asia Pacific War with ideological underpinnings, until the early 1980s (Carter and Kasulis 2013; Lafleur 1996). After the publication of a study on Watsuji by Yuasa Yasuo, Watsuji’s last major student, the value of Watsuji’s work was once again recognised, although still problematic, for its insights that challenge the colonisation of thought (Lafleur 1996).

- 3 This paper is based on a conference presentation given at the 2022 SJSF Japanese Studies Conference at Copenhagen Business School on 25 March 2022.
- 4 In Finland, native speakers of languages other than Finnish, Swedish and Sami account for 7.8% of the population (Statistics Finland 2021). Respecting the idea of a multicultural and multilingual society (OKM 2017a, 2017b), promoting labour-based migration (Bäckgren 2021) and using English terms for branding a city to the international market (Saarikivi 2021), proficiency in foreign languages – especially English – is seen as a strength, resource and asset for both an individual and society to meet future needs (OKM 2017b). According to a study by Statistics Finland (2018b), at least one foreign language is spoken by 93% of Finns aged 18-64. In addition, 90% of Finns aged 18-64 answered that they are proficient in English, 67% in Swedish and 31% in German (Statistics Finland 2018a: 4).
- 5 Drawing on the dataset of social surveys, Terasawa (2015) points out that the need to use English in Japanese society is limited to a tiny minority of the people contrary to current political discourse, popular sayings and beliefs on the importance of English in the ‘globalising’ world.

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