
WHO ARE *KEISHOGO* YOUTH? FRAMING THE INCREASINGLY DIVERSE LEARNERS OF JAPANESE AS COMMUNITY LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the long-term rising trend of the Japanese-speaking population in Australia, the number of students and children with connections to Japan has also increased in recent years. Consequently, their unique Japanese-language capabilities and learning needs have increasingly become a subject of pedagogical attention. In this context, the Australian Network for Japanese as Community Language has proposed the notion of 繋生語 (KEISHOGO or “Japanese as Community Language”) in order to better capture the unique characteristics of their language. Based on various interview surveys, this paper delineates and unpacks the experiences of the youth as they follow their learning trajectories. The challenges that both these young people and their teachers face are presented, along with some learning resources and suggestions for ways forward beyond situations where confusion and mismatched expectations are currently commonplace.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, Japanese language education in Australia has dealt with learners of Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) who have no familial Japanese connection. However, the increasing number of children with Japanese connections presents a hitherto under-addressed challenge for teachers. In this context, the focus of this paper is to undo some common misunderstandings. It also aims to offer pointers for parents/guardians and school/tertiary teachers who teach, or may teach, students with connections to Japan, and to invite them to further explore ways the particularities of this population of students can be used to enhance and enrich their learning experiences. For these purposes, we first delineate the backgrounds of such children and their families using various surveys and research conducted in educational settings. Useful resources, like the *Watashi-go Portfolio*—a series of activity-based log-books that nurture both language skills and plurilingual sensitivities amongst children—will also be introduced.

JAPANESE IN AUSTRALIA, ANJCL (AUSTRALIAN NETWORK FOR JAPANESE AS COMMUNITY LANGUAGE) AND THE BACKGROUNDS TO THE SURVEYS

THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION PROFILE IN AUSTRALIA

Bolstered by a series of language education policies including The National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987), the Japanese language has become one of the most commonly studied languages in Australia since the 1980s (De Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010, 15). According to a survey conducted by The Japan Foundation in 2021, there were well over 400,000 learners of Japanese in Australia at that time (Japan Foundation 2022). This is the fourth largest number of Japanese-language learners amongst the 212 countries and regions surveyed, indicating that the language is, on a *per capita* basis, far more popular in Australia than in any other part of the world. The other striking feature from The Japan Foundation survey is that 96% of Japanese language learners in Australia are concentrated in the primary and secondary school levels. As far as the number of the learners is concerned, the educational focus in Australian classrooms is on JSL.

JAPANESE COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

Turning our attention to the Japanese population in Australia, the annual MOFA (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs) survey of 2021 showed that there were 93,451 Japanese nationals (MOFA 2021), which was the third greatest number in the world after the USA and China. Again, accounting for the total population in each country, it represents the highest concentration of Japanese nationals outside Japan.

The Australian Census provides another set of statistics that delineates the long-term trend of the Japanese population in the country. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), 45,267 Japan-born individuals resided in the country. This is a 28% increase since the 2011 iteration of the Census and is an indication of the rise in the number of Japan-born citizens in recent years. There appears to be no signs of this steady flow abating in the near future.

It should be noted that there is a difference of over 48,000 between the number of Japanese nationals living in Australia in MOFA (2021) at 93,451, and the “Japan-born” in the 2021 Australian Census, which accounted for 45,267. It is assumed that this discrepancy reflects the number of Australian-born Japanese nationals, who are not counted in the figure from the Australian Census (i.e. children of Japanese parentage).

ANJCL AND ITS ACTIVITIES

Against this backdrop, the Australian Network for Japanese as Community Language (ANJCL) was established in 2020, by academics and educational professionals from around the country. Its initial mission was to carry out a series of surveys commissioned by The Japan Foundation in Sydney, with a focus on investigating the current states of learning environments and learning resources for children growing up in Australia with connections to Japan.¹

To date, ANJCL has conducted three studies over the course of 2019–2022.² The three studies gathered information from parents (both native and non-native Japanese speakers) currently raising children with connections to Japan, teachers, Japanese-language school/institution managers/organisers, veteran parents whose children have already become adults, and young adults who grew up as children in Australia. The first two surveys were based on a questionnaire and were conducted in, respectively, New South Wales and then the entire country. The third survey involved a series of interviews conducted via Zoom aimed at collecting more detailed and nuanced information. All the data gathered were collated for analysis, and relevant thematic issues were identified and extracted.

KEISHOGO³

The results of the surveys and interviews provide more concrete and detailed pictures of the young people with Japanese connections growing up in Australia. At the same time, it became increasingly clear that the existing ways of framing their language variety, namely the notion of “heritage language” or *keishogo* (継承語: 継 means “to inherit” or “to succeed”; 承 connotes “to receive” or “to comply”; 語 stands for “language”), is insufficient. We believe these terms do not entirely encapsulate the Japanese-language use and needs of these young people. While respecting the term *keishogo* and accepting the significance of the language being inherited from previous generations as the term *keishogo* suggests, a need was felt for a new concept or term to refer to young people’s language: the word *KEISHOGO* (繫生語), or “Japanese as Community Language,” written in italicised capital letters, was coined for this reason. The character 繫 represents “connections,” “bonds” and “links,” and 生 means “to generate” or “to be born.” Thus, *KEISHOGO* is defined as:

the language that is born from connections with parents, family, friends and society, including the language that children living overseas who are connected to Japan inherit from their parents; this language generates new meanings, creates further connections, and passes these connections on to the next generation.⁴ (Thomson 2021, 3)

As seen above, it is important to note that *KEISHOGO* is used in, and evolves through, contact with the Japanese-speaking community (see also Oriyama 2021, 39–40). We also refer affectionately to young people growing up with such language as “*KEISHOGO* Youth.”

KEISHOGO YOUTH

So, what did our studies reveal about the general profiles of *KEISHOGO* youth? Approximately 90% of those surveyed (n = 241) were born in Australia, or migrated here before they reached the age of five. Over 70% of these children were born to Japanese mothers and non-Japanese fathers, around 25% to Japanese parents, and slightly under 5% to Japanese

1 Ethics approvals for the surveys were obtained at UNSW. The relevant HREC Approval numbers are HC200071, HC200828 and HC210468.

2 Summaries of the three studies are downloadable from the ANJCL Homepage (2023).

3 *KEISHOGO*/繫生語 and *keishogo*/継承語 are both pronounced “keishōgo.”

4 “4 Following is the original Japanese text from Thomson (2021): 海外在住の日本と繋がる子どもたちが親から受け継ぐことばも含めて、親や家族、友だち、社会との繋がりから生まれ、さらなる繋がりを生み、そこで新しい意味を生み出し、その繋がりや次世代に繋げていくことば。”

fathers and non-Japanese mothers. It was also found that they often used Japanese in family communications, most typically with their native Japanese parent(s), although there were significant variations in how this was done in different families given factors such as the children's ages. Reflecting the current Australian settings where the concentration of JSL learners is the highest in global comparisons, many of the non-Japanese parents spoke at least some level of Japanese, with a number of them having very advanced proficiencies. This has resulted in some families employing Japanese as a main language for the whole family at home, even when one parent has a non-Japanese-language background.

GROWING UP AS *KEISHOGO* YOUTH

Notwithstanding the above, Australian *KEISHOGO* speakers are found to have complex and diverse backgrounds. This diversity gives rise to varying linguistic and sociocultural educational needs, as well as challenges distinct from those faced by JSL students in school settings. Examples of these backgrounds have been discussed in previous research into the lives of *KEISHOGO* speakers, including those conducted by ANJCL members. According to Kurata (2015), each *KEISHOGO* young person's family background, educational background, and degree of familiarity with Japan and the Japanese language is unique. For example, Rika, a participant in Kurata's study, was an 18-year-old female who had been living in Australia for four years at the time of the interview.⁵ With her Japanese parents, she had lived in five Asian countries, including Japan (when she was 0–1 year old), prior to arriving in Australia. At the time she took part in the study, she was studying Japanese in an upper-intermediate level course at her university. Her family background is multilingual, and her parents speak both English and Japanese. Her mother also speaks Portuguese and her father Cantonese. She described this as "weird" as one specific language was not chosen as the family's common language.

As other studies also indicate, *KEISHOGO* youth are often seen by both teachers and their classmates to be "experts" (Cho et al. 1997; Hornberger and Wang 2008; Yoshimitsu 2008) in the language classroom. However, Rika seemed to regard herself as a learner keen to develop her knowledge of Japanese, often feeling inferior to her more fluent peers. As will be shown in the next sub-section, it is not uncommon for younger *KEISHOGO* youth in high school to suffer from similar predicaments.

As in Rika's case, *KEISHOGO* speakers have complex and diverse backgrounds, and have different Japanese-language learning needs from those of non-*KEISHOGO* youth. However, this may not always be obvious or understood by their teachers. Due to these unfortunate mismatched circumstances, *KEISHOGO* youth may end up feeling frustrated in a beginner class because of the lack of advanced courses (Wu 2008). Or, conversely, they may be "embarrassed in a higher-level course where classmates and teachers place high expectations on their typically weaker literacy skills" (Yoshimitsu 2008).

An overestimation of *KEISHOGO* speakers' Japanese ability based on presumptions of background knowledge is a critical issue that hangs over them. This can lead to teachers, parents and other educators overlooking inherent challenges that these young people may face, or being disappointed when personal expectations are not met. When combined with *KEISHOGO* youth unease when under pressure to perform well, these issues could result in them dropping courses, or losing critical self-esteem and/or interest in the language and culture.

KEISHOGO YOUTH EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS

We will now look more closely at *KEISHOGO* youth experiences in Japanese-language learning within school settings. The data here come from interviews with *KEISHOGO* young people and/or their parents in the ANJCL's (2022) and Oriyama's (2017) studies. Nine *KEISHOGO* learners (seven from the ANJCL's (2022) and two from Oriyama's (2017) studies), who were all born in Australia or had migrated here at a young age, were interviewed. Their accounts of school learning, covering both positive and negative aspects, shall be looked at with a view to identify possible clues to help improve the outlook for such children, and to offer practically useful perspectives for teachers.

Some *KEISHOGO* youth reported that they felt as though they were treated like unwelcome misfits by their Japanese-language teachers due to their background or perceived "advantage." For example, Student A was told by his principal to quit the Higher School Certificate (HSC) course at the end of Year 11 because his mother spoke to him in Japanese, and Student B was instructed to study by herself in the library during the Japanese classes. Student C reported that she had complained to her school about the unfair treatment she received in class, but no action was taken because no classmate attested in support of her. Furthermore, Student D confided that, even when she did well, her native-

speaking Japanese teacher did not give her the same encouraging feedback that her non-Japanese-background classmates were given.

As mentioned in the previous section, *KEISHOGO* youth are often seen by people in their classroom to be “experts” in the language. The above cases suggest that such an assumption could ironically position them as hard-to-handle outliers. While we note that it is not always possible to know the facts through the interview process, it is nevertheless important to take the *KEISHOGO* youth seriously and to make sure that they feel they are being listened to, rather than judged. We would like to share how these young people feel through their experiences so that we can better understand them.

As in the case of Student A discussed above, at the senior secondary level the stakes are high as their academic performances affect their graduation and entrance to university. While differentiated language streams are offered and accessed across the country based on specific criteria for so-called “background/first language speakers” or “Students with Prior Learning and/or Experience” (SPLEs⁶), the challenges in accommodating the highly diverse proficiency levels and needs of those young people who are learning *KEISHOGO* are so great that they inevitably result in some exclusion (Oguro and Moloney 2012; Oriyama 2017).

Alongside these critical cases, other more encouraging stories were also told, particularly when *KEISHOGO* learners were able to study Japanese at senior secondary and onwards. Some became fluent in the language while on school/university exchange in Japan, or while studying at university. Where their needs were met and effective support was provided, school and university programmes were able to help them reconnect with their Japanese family/relatives, enhance the sense that they belong to Japanese-speaking communities, embrace their identities, and feel happy to be who they are.

What, then, would be some of the key basic principles in educational orientations that could offer effective support for *KEISHOGO* learners? The uplifting comments below made by the mother of a young girl attending kindergarten might offer clues, even for older children.

My daughter and I were both so thrilled when her kinder chose to learn Japanese ... I was happy to help by reading children's books and teaching some songs. It made my daughter and me so happy for our culture and language to be recognised by the kinder community. My daughter felt more comfortable with everyone being interested in her language at kinder and came out of her shell more easily. It is so great for Australian children to be surrounded by other cultures and languages from a young age, and for them to learn from people from different cultures. (Liddell 2022)

Here, the child's language and culture, and the expertise that both the child and her mother bring to the kindergarten, are all highly valued and appreciated. Utilising their knowledge and skills and getting them involved in class activities made the little girl happier, more confident, and more motivated to enthusiastically share her language and culture with other children. Being treated as a precious ‘asset’ rather than a ‘problem’ seems to have left a positive impact on her self-esteem, in-depth intercultural understanding, and so forth. The mother also mentions this learning/teaching as a reciprocal process where children from different backgrounds learn from one another, thereby nurturing mutual respect and conviviality. Putting the underlying thoughts above into practice requires careful planning and creative efforts. Such endeavours could be supported by the introduction of practical, versatile resources.

WATASHI-GO PORTFOLIO

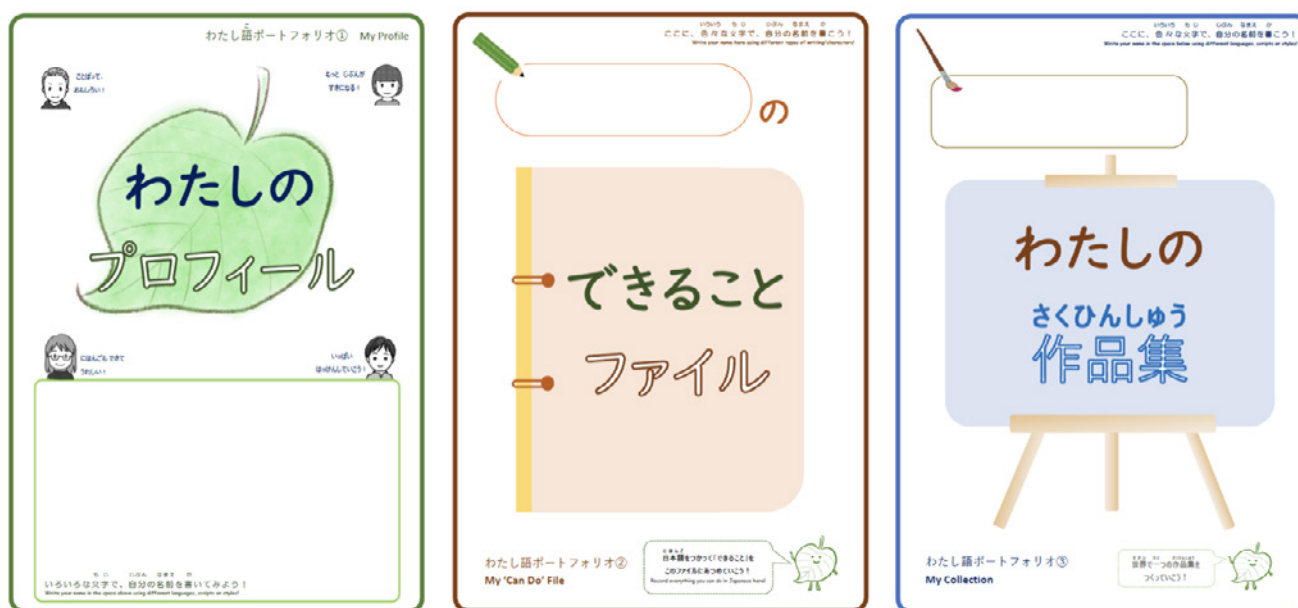
Here, we would like to introduce and recommend *Watashi-go Portfolio* as a resource to complement existing learning materials. The *Watashi-go Portfolio* (the *Portfolio*) is a series of activity-based log-books designed to encourage interactions between children and adults in order to nurture plurilingual sensitivities while assisting with their language learning.

6 The term SPLE was shared and used widely during the 2022 *Watashi-go* portfolio workshops hosted by the Japanese Teachers' Association of NSW. Where sub-streams for SPLE or background speakers are offered, *KEISHOGO* youth are often placed in such courses regardless of proficiency.

The *Watashi-go Portfolio* is a set of materials designed to foster self-esteem and intercultural understanding amongst *KEISHOGO* learners growing up in plurilingual environments.⁷ Originally developed by the German-based Team Motto Tsunagu (“Further Connections”) for children aged between five and ten, it is fun and easy to use. An Australian edition of the *Portfolio* was developed to suit the local context. It was released in 2021 and, together with its User Guide, is downloadable free of charge from the ANJCL website (N.d.).

The concept of “*Watashi-go*” or “Me-language” was borne out of the belief that each individual child has a unique language repertoire. The *Portfolio* is a three-part series of logbooks originally designed for parents and children to work together to develop language competencies.⁸ The *Portfolio* was further developed for use within Japanese community language schools, or for collaboration between schools and families. We propose that the *Portfolio* can also be an effective tool for accommodating SPLEs in mainstream primary-level Japanese-language classes.

The three parts of the *Portfolio* are: My Profile, My “Can Do” File, and My Collection.



My Profile: is a compilation of worksheets and other materials designed to raise awareness of the language and culture as they relate to each child. It aims to do so by visualising their profiles or what makes up each individual child (language, culture, etc) in fun and interactive ways. The topics covered include “About me,” “Me and my languages,” “Me and Japanese.”

My “Can Do” File: nurtures a sense of self-affirmation and positive identities through collecting what you can do and know in Japanese. Children come up with lists of things they can do using the Japanese language. They will also record things that they know and think about Japan, including through comparison with other cultures. The File can come in the form of written texts, pictures, photos etc.

7 <https://tsunagu.jp/g.jp/watashigo/>

8 Video-on-demand (VOD) of the two-part ANJCL online seminars introducing *Watashi-go Portfolio* are helpful resources and are available below. Summary reports of the two seminars are also available in English and Japanese from the ANJCL web pages below.

KEISHOGO Seminar 7: *Watashi-Go Portfolio In Action* (Australian Edition) (December 2021)

VOD: <https://jpf.org.au/events/vod-registration-japanese-language-education-seminar-with-unsw-dec-2021/>

Summary Reports (in English & Japanese): <https://us5.campaign-archive.com/?u=e811cbdf8af0639ead289d62b&id=82f0cfe93c>

KEISHOGO Seminar 8: *Watashi-Go Portfolio for Creating Connections - How to make the most of the Australian Edition* (February 2022)

VOD: <https://jpf.org.au/events/vod-registration-japanese-language-education-seminar-with-unsw-feb-2022/>

Summary reports (in English & Japanese): <https://us5.campaign-archive.com/?u=e811cbdf8af0639ead289d62b&id=b6bf9d856a>

The **ANJCL website** also has links to various teaching and learning resources, including the Facebook group page and English and Japanese bilingual ANJCL Newsletters: <https://www.keicho-australia.org/resources>.

My Collection: is a compilation of what each child has achieved and/or created using Japanese. It can show links between what they have already done and their future goals.

These three parts are designed to naturally encourage conversations at home through various reflective activity-sheets covering familiar everyday themes. As children visualise their own language, culture, environment, and background through the *Portfolio's* activities, they come to better understand themselves. They also further develop respect for other people, languages and cultures, which is a prerequisite for living well in plurilingual Australian society. Children are expected to gain confidence as Japanese-speaking individuals while developing respect towards others and other languages and cultures. They do this through realising who they are, what they can/could do now and in the future, and how they are situated in the plurilingual and pluricultural society of today. With these perspectives in mind, parents and teachers can facilitate the use of the *Portfolio* at school, at home or both.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have attempted to describe who *KEISHOGO* youth are, and what challenges these distinctively diverse individuals potentially face in their everyday school and home environments. We have also aimed at suggesting ways these challenges may be addressed and providing resources for use in classrooms and homes. In addition, we have identified mismatched expectations between children/families and teachers/school settings. At the outset, we presented long-term and recent demographic trends where the number of *KEISHOGO* speakers has risen and is expected to continue increasing in number and presence over the coming years. In other words, they are, and will remain, integral members of multi- and pluricultural Australia. In addition, we have seen that each *KEISHOGO* learner has unique linguistic abilities and needs. They are often faced with unfounded expectations regarding their Japanese-language abilities, which may create issues around their identity formation. One of our broader aims is to rectify such issues and support the teaching of these children by helping related parties build ideal relations and educational environments based on mutual understanding.

The growing awareness of realities surrounding the experiences of *KEISHOGO* learners poses new challenges to teaching efforts at all levels. For Japanese-language teachers who are not well prepared for such situations, it is possible, or even likely, that having *KEISHOGO* learners in their classrooms could be a challenging or daunting experience. We thus suggested ways of empowering teachers who may feel unsure in these situations, and ways to accommodate *KEISHOGO* youth and their needs. It is important that the mismatch in expectations held by both teachers and students/parents needs to be discussed and resolved. This could be done by embracing such children, and by all concerned parties working together, rather than struggling in isolation to deal with the issues.

The challenges described above can be helped greatly by community and forum building amongst stakeholders including teachers, students/pupils, parents/guardians, schools, government officials, researchers, and so forth. Through interactions within such communities, specific needs of teachers/students, teacher-training ideas, and required institutional support may be identified. Sharing experiences and learning from other teachers' practices will support the operation of classes that may include *KEISHOGO* learners, and encourage collaboration for future teaching projects.

The Australian edition of *Watashi-go Portfolio* introduced here is an example of an educational resource for children who have connections to Japan. It was developed as a result of broad international collaborations amongst parents, teachers and academics. It is hoped that similarly fruitful concerted efforts in future would lead to the successful creation of useful materials and/or learning environments elsewhere as well.

Communities could be newly established, and/or existing communities, such as local state- and territory-based Japanese teachers' associations may be utilised. Alternatively, networking and collaboration through online communities, for example, the Japanese Language Teachers of Australia group on Facebook (2024), could also help as a powerful source of inspiration.

Finally, we wish to inspire classroom teachers to have a good understanding of *KEISHOGO* Youths and want to help make classrooms more inclusive and inspiring for all students. We believe that by working together, we can achieve these goals.

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