Situated Metalinguistic Awareness: Learner Reflections through Translation Comparison of *The Giving Tree*

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Abstract

This article describes a classroom project designed to foster metalinguistic awareness and interpretive skills among advanced-level learners of Japanese through the comparative analysis of translated picture books. Drawing on *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and its two Japanese translations, learners examined how lexical and stylistic choices shaped tone, perspective, and cultural framing. Activities included translation equivalence exercises, class discussions, and revision of learner-generated translations. Learners engaged in meaning negotiation, reflecting critically on their linguistic choices and developing heightened sensitivity to both Japanese and their native languages. Findings suggest that comparing published translations and revising one's own can effectively deepen language awareness and promote interpretive flexibility in second language classrooms.

Keywords: *metalinguistic awareness, translation pedagogy, picture books*

Introduction

Metalinguistic awareness, the ability to reflect on and analyze language, is recognized as essential in second language (L2) learning. It enables learners to notice form-meaning relationships, compare structures across languages, and consider how tone and nuance shape interpretation (Berry, 2005; Renou, 2001). However, research has noted that metalinguistic awareness is not easily transmitted through explicit explanation alone; rather, it tends to develop through structured engagement in tasks that prompt learners to articulate and resolve language-related problems (Salman & Haskel-Shaham, 2023; Swain & Lapkin, 2002).

Research in second language acquisition helps clarify how such engagement fosters metalinguistic awareness. Cross-linguistic comparison, for instance, can make interlanguage gaps more salient and promote restructuring (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). When learners collaboratively engage in discussing linguistic

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choices, they externalize and negotiate their thinking, thereby mediating learning through what Swain and Lapkin (2002) described as collaborative dialogue. These processes require learners to reflect on language form, meaning, and use, thereby cultivating metalinguistic awareness in practice. Building on these insights, recent reviews and classroom-based studies highlight translation activities as productive sites for such engagement. By inviting learners to compare languages, evaluate alternatives, and justify lexical and stylistic decisions, translation tasks can make interlanguage holes visible and foster reflective awareness of vocabulary, grammar, and register (Salman & Haskel-Shaham, 2023; Wang & Liu, 2024).

In this sense, translated picture books provide a particularly rich site for reflective and collaborative engagement. Their linguistic accessibility combined with cultural and emotional depth invites learners to notice how subtle shifts in wording reshape perspective, tone, and meaning. In Japanese language education, comparing English picture books and their Japanese translation has been shown to sharpen sensitivity to how linguistic choices reflect social roles, values, and perspective (Masaki & Kuse, 2014; Murabata & Kuroki, 2020; Naruoka, 2013). Because English and Japanese differ substantially in syntactic structure, levels of explicitness, and systems of politeness, translation between the two languages requires careful attention to voice, stance, and relational nuance. These comparisons encourage interpretive judgment, highlight the influence of word choice, and foster awareness of both target and native (L1) languages. The layered simplicity of picture books thus positions language not as a fixed system of equivalents, but as a flexible medium shaped by cultural framing and reader interpretation.

This article shares a classroom-based example of this approach. In an advanced-level college Japanese course, learners examined *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964) alongside its two Japanese translations. Through collaborative analysis, class discussion, and translation revision, learners explored how meaning shifts across linguistic and cultural frames, and how translation can function as a reflective act.

The project described here situates metalinguistic awareness not as a goal to be taught, but as a mode of thinking to be cultivated through guided comparison, discussion, and revision. This article outlines the unit design, learner responses, and the potential of picture book translation as a pedagogical tool in L2 instruction.

Unit Overview and Class Activities

The unit was implemented in a fourth-year Japanese course at a private U.S. university in Spring 2022. According to the course syllabus, the program targets Advanced Low proficiency on the ACTFL scale by the end of the academic year. Five learners enrolled in the course, all with some degree of Asian heritage or multilingual background. The course emphasized authentic materials and interpretive tasks over explicit grammar instruction.

The primary text used in this unit was *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein (1964) and its two Japanese translations; one by Kiichiro Honda (1976) and the other by Haruki Murakami (2010). The story portrays the evolving relationship between a tree and a boy. As the boy grows older, he returns to the tree at different life stages to take what he needs—apples, branches, the trunk—until only a stump remains. The tree gives selflessly, motivated by love and devotion. The book's accessible language, emotional depth, and multiple interpretations made it ideal for advanced learners. Two published Japanese translations provided a unique op-

portunity to explore how translation choices reflect linguistic and cultural framing.

The unit was designed with the following pedagogical objectives:

- developing metalinguistic awareness
- examining how word choice shapes tone and interpretation
- reflecting on Japanese and L1 norms

The unit followed five steps over five 90-minute sessions.

Introducing Translation Equivalence

To lay the groundwork, the first session introduced concepts from translation theory, focusing on equivalence, domestication, and foreignization. Learners analyzed multiple Japanese translations of the opening passage from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to examine how tone, register, and interpretive nuance shift across versions. These comparisons helped learners move beyond literal meaning and consider the translator's role as an interpretive agent.

Discussing the Original Text and Initial Translations

In the second session, learners read and discussed the original English version of *The Giving Tree*. Although all were familiar with the book from childhood, many expressed that their interpretation had changed. Several noted that while they once saw the story as warm and comforting, they now found it sad or unsettling. Others commented that they had previously identified with the boy but now empathized more with the tree.

The class discussion focused on themes of parental love and self-sacrifice, particularly through the lens of the tree's consistent use of feminine pronouns and her unconditional giving. Learners also analyzed how the word *love* shifts in meaning throughout the story, and how the absence of the word *happy* in reference to the boy, despite its repeated use for the tree, contributes to the emotional and moral ambiguity of the ending.

Following this discussion, learners completed a short translation task using an excerpt from the original text. Their decisions, such as how to translate *happy*, sparked initial reflection on how word choice affects tone and meaning. These reflections laid the groundwork for deeper comparative analysis in subsequent sessions.

Analysis of Published Translations

Sessions three and four focused on close reading of Honda's and Murakami's versions. Learners noted striking tonal differences, such as translating "happy" as *ureshii* [fleeting joy] versus *shiawase* [deeper, lasting fulfillment]. Many realized that what initially seemed like a small lexical difference could dramatically shift the story's emotional frame.

Other differences prompted reflection on broader cultural implications. The English title *The Giving Tree* was rendered by both translators as *Ōkina Ki* [The Big Tree], a choice that learners felt de-emphasized the theme of selflessness. One learner noted that while "big" in English can carry metaphorical weight, suggesting moral generosity or emotional significance, *ōkina* in Japanese tends to describe physical size without necessarily implying virtue or altruism. This led to a discussion of how conceptual metaphors and evaluative language differ across languages. Learners reflected on how English frequently uses physical descriptors metaphorically (e.g., "a big heart"), whereas Japanese often relies on different strategies, such as explicit evaluative terms or context, to convey moral or emotional depth. As a result, learners questioned whether the Japanese title might shift

the reader's expectations from a moral narrative about giving to a more neutral story about a large tree, thereby subtly altering the interpretive frame.

Learners also discussed a pivotal line from the climactic scene near the end of the story, when the tree has given away her apples, branches, and trunk: "And the tree was happy… but not really." Honda's *dakedo sore wa hontō kana?* [but was that really true?] preserved ambiguity, while Murakami's *nante naremasen yo ne* [there's no way she could be happy, right?] made the author's stance explicit. Some learners felt that Honda's rhetorical question invited reader interpretation in line with traditional norms of indirectness, whereas Murakami's phrasing reflected a contemporary preference for clarity. This led learners to consider how translation choices are shaped not only by language, but by changing cultural expectations and communicative styles.

Throughout these sessions, learners displayed increased sensitivity to how tone, pronoun use, and modal expressions function in context. For example, some learners initially used polite or neutral forms in their translations but later revised them to more intimate or maternal expressions, such as *shiawase ni narinasai* [go be happy], reflecting a shift in how they interpreted the tree's role in the story.

Revision as Meaning-Making

In the final session, learners revisited their original translations and produced revised versions with written reflections. This step reinforced the idea that translation is not simply a linguistic exercise, but an act of negotiation shaped by cultural, emotional, and pragmatic concerns.

Many had initially rendered the climactic line in literal declarative terms, such as *ki wa shiawase deshita… demo hontō wa sonna koto wa arimasen* [the tree was happy… but in truth, that wasn't the case]. After class discussion, several revised it to a more open-ended question, such as *demo sore wa hontō kana?* [but was that really true?], aiming to preserve ambiguity. One learner explained that their original version followed formal equivalence too closely and imposed a moral judgment. In contrast, their revised version mirrored the original's brevity and subtlety, allowing readers to interpret the tree's emotional state at that moment.

Beyond this line, learners also reconsidered other linguistic choices. Some reflected on their use of demonstratives such as *kono ki* [this tree] or *sono ki* [that tree], noting that these forms positioned the narrator at a distance. By revising the phrase to simply *ki* [the tree], they sought to reduce narrative distance and create more immediate emotional alignment with the tree's perspective.

Others noticed how register and orthography can shape interpretation. One learner revised the ending into a polite, reader-directed form (*…hontō desu ka?* […is that true?]), explaining that the use of the *desu/masu* style created a tone of direct engagement with the reader. This shift demonstrated awareness not only of lexical meaning but of audience positioning and pragmatic effect. Another reflected on the visual impact of kanji (Chinese characters) usage, deliberately limiting kanji to key nouns, while rendering other portions in hiragana (phonetic script) to create simplicity and openness. These revisions demonstrated awareness not only of vocabulary and grammar, but of audience positioning, tone, and textual presentation.

Through this process, learners developed a heightened sensitivity to tone, implication, and reader perspective. Their revisions demonstrated not only increased linguistic awareness but also a shift toward viewing translation as a reflective, meaning-making activity. By justifying their choices and responding to the interpretive possibilities highlighted in Honda and Murakami's versions, learners

practiced metalinguistic reasoning in action, connecting language form to cultural positioning and narrative effect.

Learner Reflections and Outcomes

Through this unit, learners developed and enacted metalinguistic awareness not as an abstract construct but as a practical, interpretive process. By comparing their own translations with two published versions, they recognized how linguistic choices are embedded in broader systems of meaning, culture, and interaction.

Reflections from class discussions and written responses revealed two key areas of growth. First, learners reported increased sensitivity to how meaning is shaped in both Japanese and their native languages. For instance, one learner noted the challenge of choosing between *morau* ["to receive," neutral or casual] or *itadaku* ["to humbly receive," honorific] to translate "receive," reflecting on how honorific levels encode social values. Others observed how subtle shifts in phrasing can affect emotional nuance, particularly when rendering the tree's voice as gentle, directive, or self-effacing.

Second, learners developed a greater appreciation for the role of the translator as an interpreter and ethical agent. Many commented that they had previously viewed translation as a matter of accuracy or vocabulary but came to see it as a process of judgment involving tone, narrative stance, and cultural framing. Comparing two professional translations of the same text—each compelling yet distinct—highlighted that there is no single "correct" answer, only interpretive choice.

Post-unit reflections and survey responses underscored this shift. Several learners noted increased attention to word choice and tone when reading or writing in Japanese. Others remarked that the project changed how they think about language use in general, including in their L1 or heritage language. One learner wrote, "Now I think more carefully about how to say things in both Japanese and English—not just what is 'correct,' but what feels right in the context."

Ultimately, the project cultivated learners' ability to move flexibly between languages, evaluate the interpretive consequences of linguistic choices, and reflect critically on meaning-making across cultural frames. These habits, while grounded in translation practice, extended to broader forms of intercultural and metacognitive awareness, valuable not only in language learning but in communication more generally.

Conclusion: Implications for Classroom Practice

This classroom project has shown how comparing translations of a picture book can deepen learners' awareness of language and meaning, foster critical interpretive skills, and prompt reflection on the cultural and ethical implications of word choice. For many learners, this was their first time seriously engaging with translation as an interpretive act. Through this process, they began to see language not as a set of equivalents, but as a medium shaped by perspective, intention, and context.

The Giving Tree, with its layered emotional tone and open-ended moral message, provided an ideal site for this kind of inquiry. Comparing two professional translations alongside their own helped students grasp how different word choices can lead to different emotional readings. It also encouraged them to consider their own responsibility as users of language, in both Japanese and their native language. The unit prompted greater reflection on how language functions differently across cultural contexts and how interpretation is always an act of positioning.

Although few picture books have multiple published translations, much can still be learned through comparisons with one translation alone. Because many picture books, including *The Giving Tree*, have been translated into numerous other languages, this approach could readily be adapted for courses in other target languages. The core pedagogical value, using translation comparison to engage with linguistic nuance, cultural framing, and interpretive choice, remains applicable across a wide range of language learning contexts.

While the depth of interpretive analysis presented in this article may be most appropriate for high-intermediate to advanced learners, similar activities could be adapted for lower proficiency levels through more focused and scaffolded tasks. For example, beginners might compare short phrases, examine differences in politeness forms, or discuss alternative lexical choices with guided support. Even at early stages, such structured comparison can begin to cultivate sensitivity to how language encodes perspective and social meaning.

Compared to news media or overtly ideological texts, picture books often offer a more neutral ground for exploring complex social and cultural topics. Used thoughtfully, they can prompt discussions about values, identity, and representation. When paired with other materials, such as news articles, short essays, or film excerpts addressing similar themes of family, responsibility, or self-sacrifice, picture books can become powerful tools not only for language development, but also for cultivating intercultural understanding and critical literacy.

Ultimately, this project underscores the pedagogical value of picture books as more than just accessible texts. They are rich sites for metalinguistic inquiry, interpretive practice, and intercultural engagement, particularly when learners are invited to inhabit the roles of readers, translators, and meaning makers.

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