The demography of Japanese foreign registered citizens has been changing since the revised migration law of 1990. Newer immigrant languages such as Portuguese, Spanish and Filipino have been added to the languages spoken by long-established immigrant communities such as Chinese and Korean (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2008; Tagengoka Gensho Kenkyukai, 2013). With this dynamic multilingualism as a background, this paper aims to explore the possibility of ‘community’ as a language learning domain. To do that we will present two cases studies about children from two ethnic minority communities in Japan.

The first one looks at the supplemental Japanese language class in a school setting. The foreign national children at this school learned to read and write in Japanese in this classroom first. It is a linguistic ethnography of classroom discourse, mainly focusing on two Korean pupils, being pulled out from the mainstream class. The study was conducted before the Japanese as a second language curriculum (JSL) was publically announced. Thus, this class was entirely run by one Japanese veteran teacher who created the self-contained space for learning within the state elementary school i.e, the multilingual possibilities of schooling (Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006).

The second study explores the nature of literacy practices in faith settings (McMillon & Edwards, 2004; Gregory et al, 2010; Avni, 2012). This ongoing ethnographic research project looks at a group of children who attend mother tongue extra curricular lessons for pupils from Spanish-speaking families. The lessons take place every Saturday at a catholic church in central Tokyo. We focus on a particular literacy event: the talk between a Peruvian teacher and her 6 to 8 year-old pupils while teaching/learning to read and write in Spanish. These studies address the challenges of becoming literate in a second language either their heritage language or the language of the majority.

Keywords: Literacy practices; classroom discourse.