The Language Friends

Designing a Confidence-First English Learning System for Young Children in Japan

Project Overview

The Language Friends is a bilingual children's English learning project designed for Japanese families with children ages 2–7. It consists of five original picture books, a Japanese-first bilingual website, and a supporting launch ecosystem intended to grow over time.

This project was built from nothing. No existing brand, no client brief, no external team.

In 45 days, I designed and produced:

- Five complete children's books
- A bilingual (JP/EN) website
- A cohesive character system
- A pedagogical framework grounded in linguistics and real teaching experience
- A scalable design and content system ready for launch

Unlike many portfolio projects, this is not a speculative redesign or a fictional interface. It is a real product, built to ship, test, and evolve in the real world.

The Spark

The idea began in an ordinary place.

While visiting a local city hall in Japan, I noticed a small selection of children's books available for families. Looking through them, I started thinking less about the books themselves and more about *how* language is introduced to children here.

That moment connected with something I had already experienced for years as a teacher.

Japan places enormous emphasis on English grammar, vocabulary lists, and correctness. Children often know rules, but hesitate to speak. Mistakes are treated as failure instead of progress. Confidence is rarely prioritized.

I began asking a simple question:

What if early English exposure focused on familiarity, patterns, and confidence instead of correctness?

That question became the foundation of The Language Friends.

The Problem

Most early English learning materials in Japan suffer from a similar set of issues:

- They prioritize grammar and accuracy over confidence
- They overwhelm children with information instead of repetition
- They treat English as a school subject rather than a living language
- They expect output before children feel safe enough to speak

For parents, this creates friction and uncertainty. Many want to expose their children to English early, but don't know how to do it in a way that feels natural, calm, and pressure-free.

For children, it often results in anxiety around speaking and a belief that mistakes are something to avoid.

The Language Friends was designed to challenge that model.

Research & Foundations

This project did not rely on a single research method. Instead, it drew from overlapping forms of real-world insight:

Linguistic & Pedagogical Research

I studied bilingual language acquisition, focusing on how children naturally acquire multiple languages through exposure, repetition, and pattern recognition rather than explicit instruction.

Teaching Experience

I have over eight years of experience teaching English in Japan across all ages, from toddlers to adults in their 80s. This includes:

- One-on-one lessons
- Group classes
- Classroom teaching
- Parent-child learning environments

This experience provided firsthand insight into how Japanese learners internalize language and where traditional systems fail.

Cultural Context

Living in Japan long-term meant constant exposure to parents, schools, and educational expectations. I understood not only how children learn, but how parents *evaluate* learning tools.

This combination allowed me to design from lived experience rather than abstract assumptions.

Core Pedagogical Approach

The Language Friends is not story-based learning.

Each book is built around:

- One sentence pattern
- One linguistic concept
- Heavy repetition
- Strong visual reinforcement
- Minimal cognitive load

Children are not asked to "understand" grammar. They are exposed to patterns repeatedly until familiarity forms naturally.

The books use:

- Fixed characters to build emotional attachment
- Color coding to reinforce structure
- Icons and visuals to anchor meaning

- Simple, consistent layouts across all books

The goal is confidence through exposure, not performance.

Characters as Learning Anchors

Three recurring characters appear across all books and the website:

- Moko (blue): curious and adventurous
- Niko (purple): calm and thoughtful
- Okja (yellow): playful and energetic

These characters serve as emotional anchors. Children see the same faces repeatedly, reducing cognitive load and increasing comfort.

For parents, the characters provide continuity and clarity across books and series.

Design Process

Designing Without Figma

I deliberately chose not to design this project in Figma.

Multilingual typography, especially Japanese and English together, behaves very differently in real environments than in design tools. Line breaks, spacing, and readability cannot be accurately simulated without testing in production.

Instead, I:

- Used light paper sketches to define structure
- Designed directly in code
- Iterated visually in the browser

This approach allowed me to confront real constraints early, particularly around responsive layouts and language switching.

Building the Website

The website was designed to do one thing above all else: build trust.

This is a new brand. There are no reviews, no recognition, no social proof yet. Asking users to "buy now" would have been premature.

Key UX decisions included:

- A guided "new visitors" experience that explains the concept step-by-step
- A bento-style hero layout aligned with Japanese UX expectations
- Clear pedagogy explanations written for parents, not educators
- Email signup as the primary CTA instead of immediate purchase pressure

The site is calm, structured, and intentionally non-salesy.

Animation & Interaction

Early versions of the site used complex GSAP animations. While visually impressive, they broke easily across screen sizes and introduced usability issues.

I ultimately simplified motion to subtle progressive disclosure:

- Content appears as users scroll
- Sections are revealed one at a time
- Cognitive load is reduced

This decision aligned motion with pedagogy. Just as the books introduce one concept at a time, the site reveals information gradually.

Multilingual Challenges

Typography was the single hardest part of the project.

Japanese and English have fundamentally different spacing behaviors. Perfect alignment is unrealistic without sacrificing readability.

Rather than chasing pixel perfection, I prioritized:

- Legibility
- Calm spacing
- Consistency across pages

Occasional widows and spacing tradeoffs were accepted as a reality of multilingual UX. The experience remains readable and structured, even if not mathematically perfect.

Outcome (Pre-Launch)

The Language Friends is now fully built and approaching launch.

In 45 days, I created:

- Five finished books
- A bilingual website
- A complete design and content system
- A clear launch and iteration plan

While analytics and sales data will come post-launch, the product itself is coherent, intentional, and ready to be tested in the real world.

Reflections

Designing in Code Changed Everything

Building directly in code forced real decisions early and removed abstraction. It made the design process more honest and more demanding.

Multilingual UX Requires Judgment, Not Perfection

Some problems cannot be "designed away." Learning when to stop refining is a critical design skill.

Systems Enable Speed

The only reason this project was possible in 45 days was systemization. Characters, layouts, and content rules made scale achievable.

Trust Is a UX Outcome

Confidence doesn't come from marketing tricks. It comes from clarity, restraint, and respect for the user.

TL;DR

- The project began with a real-world observation about children's books in Japan
- Research combined linguistics, pedagogy, and teaching experience
- The problem focused on confidence-first language exposure
- Design was done directly in code to handle real constraints
- Five books and a bilingual website were built as one system
- The product is now launch-ready and designed to evolve post-launch