

## **Book Review**

**Foreign Language Education in Japan: Exploring Qualitative Approaches**, Sachiko Horiguchi, Yuki Imoto, and Gregory S. Poole (Eds.) (2015). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 191 pages, Paperback €45.20 ISBN: 978-94-6300-323-0 (paperback)

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This collection of ten chapters discusses the complexities present in the enactment of language education policies and their impact on local educational and language practices in and beyond Japan. Exploring the topic on various levels such as state, institutional, classroom, and individual, and through qualitative methodologies, the book illustrates the “cacophony of voices” (p.1) lurking in Japanese society which reflect the ideologies of nation state, language, and national identity. As the contributors to this volume come from not only applied linguistics but also anthropological backgrounds, the book provides unique insights into foreign language education in Japan.

The volume opens with a Foreword by Ryuko Kubota. Here, Kubota highlights the importance of examining language education policies and practices at both macro and micro levels.

Chapter 1 is written by the book’s editors, Sachiko Horiguchi, Yuki Imoto, and Gregory S. Poole, and introduces the social and historical background of foreign language education in Japan, particularly English language education. The authors illustrate the historical processes of the formation and reformation of education in Japan, by interweaving its relationship with the social, political and economic shifts of the country. This introductory chapter sets the stage for the discussions in subsequent chapters.

The first section of the book, from Chapter 2 to 6, explores issues of implementing national and transnational education policies in various contexts and institutions both in and outside Japan. The second section, from Chapter 7 to 10, focuses on issues of learning in the context of English language education.

In Chapter 2, Kiri Lee and Neriko Musha Doerr report on an ethnographic study investigating the constraints in establishing and managing a weekend Japanese language school in the US, from the perspectives of the local administrators and the principals deployed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). The chapter

discusses how MEXT's principle of educating the children of Japanese citizens overseas with a standardised curriculum and state-sponsored textbooks is at odds with the diverse student body, such as children of inter-racial couples and/or with US permanent residency. Lee and Doerr illuminate the incongruity between the image of Japanese citizens embedded in MEXT's approach and the changing relationships to the Japanese language as experienced by transnational families in the contemporary era.

In the following chapter, Thomas Hardy turns the spotlight on the processes of constructing government-approved English language textbooks for junior high school students in Japan. Hardy, a core member of the textbook writing team, reports on his long-term ethnographic study which explores how the identities of characters and locations in the textbooks are negotiated and created by the writers. Issues considered comprise: which nationalities should be included; which geographical location should be chosen for the main setting of the narratives; and which variety of English should be employed for conversations between the characters. The author argues that these decision-making processes construct the cultural *Other* in a particular way and draw the boundary between *us* and *them*.

The paradox of the globalisation discourses in Japanese society is discussed in Chapter 4, where Akiko Murata draws attention to the way in which English is promoted, both in and outside the educational institution. This chapter is based on two case studies. The first one explores language use during a graduate seminar in an engineering school where Japanese and international students study together. The second focuses on the career path of an Indian software engineer in the Japanese labour market. Through these case studies, the author points out that while English is assigned a role as a gatekeeper in the entry stage for foreign students and workers, and that the use of English is officially promoted in various professional contexts, it is Japanese language skills which set the boundaries for educational experiences and career mobility of foreign students and workers. Murata argues that these situations deprive both Japanese and international students of learning opportunities, as well as interfering with sustainable work relations between local and foreign workers.

Drawing on a detailed ethnographic case study (Chapter 5), Yuki Imoto and Sachiko Horiguchi portray the complexities of institutional reform in adopting a European language education policy - the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The authors focus on the cultural politics involved in bringing a foreign policy into a Japanese institutional context. They also highlight some of the organisational politics present in the context of a large university undergoing institutional reform. Three main factors are identified

as contributing to the failure of the CEFR in Japan: multiple interpretations of the reform objectives and the policies; the status of individuals within each institution, and their ideological orientations towards foreign language education.

Chapter 6 by Gregory S. Poole and Hinako Takahashi discusses the challenges in practising alternative education in Japanese educational contexts. Their account of two private English-immersion primary schools reports that the schools' statuses of being both MEXT-accredited and English-immersion are attractive for the students' parents. This is because these features can offer their children a competitive edge by providing them with 'international' English skills, but still can secure their access to elite secondary schools and universities in Japan. However, the authors point out that the schools' other aim of nurturing students' critical thinking skills in an open classroom environment is secondary to the emphasis given to MEXT-school regulations, which, according to the authors, is closely linked to reinforcing notions of Japanese-ness. In parallel with Chapter 2, this chapter raises an important question as to whether and how Japanese school systems can diversify educational opportunities.

The second part of the book (Chapter 7, 8, 9, and 10) focuses on issues of learning in the context of English language education. Thus, Chapter 7 by Tiina Matikainen explores teacher and student beliefs about what makes a good language teacher and a good learner. Interview data, collected from thirty students and five non-Japanese English teachers at a university in Japan, revealed that there was a consensus among the participants that being motivated was the most important characteristic of a successful language learner. On the other hand, the data also showed the difference between the teachers and the students as to their respective ideas of what constitutes a good language teacher. The chapter suggests that understanding each other's expectations and beliefs will help build shared cultures of learning in a classroom, maximising learning opportunities.

In Chapter 8, Akiko Katayama looks at the performances of Japanese EFL learners in a language classroom. The focal point of this chapter is the two differing, inconsistent language practices that Japanese junior college students with English majors demonstrated in two different courses. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of power and discourse, Katayama attempts to elucidate the students' complex attitudes towards learning English. Through observations and interviews, the author associates the students' passion for imitating native-like accents during a pronunciation class with their subjugation to the discourse of nativeness. On the other hand, the author argues that the adherence of the same group of students to

maintaining a heavy Japanese accent and their reluctance to speak English during a discussion class manifest the discourse of being proper ‘Japanese’ in power among their peer group. The chapter offers an alternative understanding of why incessant state interventions in English language education do not produce the intended outcome of linear development in learners’ proficiency.

Chapter 9 by Rieko Matsuoka examines the transformation in Japanese nursing students’ communication attitudes and behaviours when speaking English. The author proposes that reducing the level of communication apprehension is crucial for developing an individual’s communicative competence in the target language. To illustrate how this socio-psychological state can be controlled, Matsuoka examines the students’ understanding of their experiences of communicating in English as interns at an international academic conference. Through content analysis, the author identifies factors of ‘competitiveness,’ ‘perfectionism,’ and/or ‘other-directedness’ causing anxiety. The analysis of the interview data also reveals how these elements were minimised. Matsuoka argues that hands-on, local experiences of using English for communicative purposes led to the students developing their ‘self-efficacy’ and ‘strategy’ to increase their willingness to communicate in the target language.

The identity development of a high school English language teacher during a year-long internship at Temple University Japan Campus is reported by Patrick Rosenkjar in Chapter 10. The chapter presents the journal entries kept by the teacher during the internship, accompanied by the responses provided by his supervisor (Rosenkjar). Because of the contemporary situation whereby communicative language teaching has long been endorsed by MEXT for fostering learners’ proficiency, the author focuses on how the teacher’s perspectives on pedagogy shifted from the traditional grammar-translation method to the communicative approach.

The Afterword is provided by Neriko Musha Doerr, who critically evaluates the arguments developed and the underlying assumptions embedded in the preceding chapters, based on the following topics: (1) language proficiency; (2) native speaker myth; (3) the gap between the rhetoric surrounding and the actual reception of individuals with English proficiency; (4) the notion of English as a global language; (5) the implications of publishing this volume itself in English. While some readers may find it somewhat difficult to trace the connections between the previous chapters when reading them individually, this concluding chapter effectively summarises the interrelated issues as well as clarifying some contradictory points which emerged from the chapters. Doerr’s Afterword raises important questions for

further discussions about change in language pedagogy and policy in Japan.

The volume ends with an Appendix consisting of discussion questions set for each chapter. These questions make this volume not only a collection of research papers but also case studies that allow policy makers, researchers, educators and students in the field of language education in Japan to engage in dialogues for policy interventions and pedagogical refinement.

Overall, the book clearly demonstrates the complex and intricate picture pertaining to foreign language education policies and practices in Japanese society, from multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives based on applied linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. However, some of the chapters seem slightly incongruous considering the focus of the book: the line of the arguments throughout the volume centres on the ideologies of nation state, national identity, and language, while other chapters concentrate on the internal processes of individual learners but without linking to the impact of ideologies and discourses that circulate in educational spheres. In addition, it might be argued that the title of the book, *Foreign Language Education in Japan* is misleading. Although the editors note in Chapter 1 that the book mainly focuses on English language education, the interrelationships between English and other foreign languages in the context of language education are largely left unexplored. As a consequence, the book unfortunately serves to underline the hegemony of English in Japan.

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