
Book Reviews

English in Japan in the Era of Globalization

Phillip Seargeant (Ed.). Palgrave Macmillan, (2011) (208 pages). ISBN: 978-1-137-43914-7 Price: 3,622yen

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English in Japan in the Era of Globalization is a collection of articles edited by Phillip Seargeant. Seargeant is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the Centre for Language and Communication, The Open University UK and has previously written on World Englishes, English as a Global Language, and the role of English in Japan (Seargeant, 2009; Seargeant, 2012). This collection of articles, first published in hardback in 2011, concerns itself with perceptions of the role of English held by elites and citizens in Japan and how such perceptions are currently being influenced by globalization. How such perceptions are created, propagated, and experienced is a particular focus of many of the articles. Seargeant suggests that the articles in the book together paint the picture of “A society which still maintains an ambivalent attitude to the English language, but one in which the language operates as an important touchstone for a range of modern social, cultural and political issues” (p. 10). To my knowledge this is the only book to collect such a wide-ranging number of articles concerned with globalization and the role of English within it with specific focus on the Japanese context. It seems reasonable to suggest that as workers in Japanese tertiary education, we can reach a better understanding of our teaching context and the attitudes of our students and how both of these are influenced by political and societal discourses.

After an introduction which includes a potted history of the role of English in Japan, the book is split into two sections, five articles on English in the education system and four on English in Japanese society in culture. Taken together, the articles cover a spectrum of analysis on changing perspectives of the role of English. The research ranges from investigations into how Japanese citizens' views are influenced by powerful elites, to how conflict can arise within educational institutions due to differing beliefs on the role of English, to how individuals navigate narratives on what it means to be Japanese, mixed-ethnicity, foreign, and a global citizen in everyday life. As space will not allow me to discuss all the articles, in order to give a flavor of the book I would like to discuss three articles, two from the first section and one from the latter focusing on themes ranging from the societal elite to the personal level.

“Elite Discourses of Globalization in Japan: The Role of English”, by Mai Yamaguchi and James W. Tollefson, provides a discussion of competing narratives on the desirability of globalization and thus the role of English created by political and academic intuitions. It is argued that academic institutions through promotion material are seen as representing globalization and greater English proficiency as an opportunity for Japan to advance and play an important role in global society. However, political discourses have been seen to present globalization as a “threat to the country’s unity, values and security” (p. 16). The authors use critical discourse analysis to detail how these views are propagated. The article presents a convincing argument that elite discourses help foster an ambivalent attitude to English in educators, students, and the general citizenry.

While the article above detailed how beliefs are created in society, the next article to be discussed focuses on how differing beliefs concerning the role of English as an International Language (EIL) can cause friction in an educational environment. “‘Not Everyone Can Be a Star’: Students’ and Teachers’ Beliefs about English Teaching in Japan” by Aya Matsuda details the results of a qualitative research study done in a senior high school in Tokyo. Matsuda found that there was consensus that EIL is a phenomenon, but there were significant differences in how it is viewed and in its implications for language provision. Students were positive toward the phenomenon viewing EIL as an opportunity,

while teachers had a more negative view seeing it as advantaging English-speaking countries. Concerning curriculum content, students saw English as a necessary skill for their futures and thought communication should be a focus, while teachers saw it as negligibly important and thought the focus of curriculum content should be on language awareness rather than proficiency. These opposing views were seen as creating friction in the classroom and mutually negative assessment between students and teachers, with students seeing class content as irrelevant and teachers seeing students as unenthusiastic towards provided content. The author suggests the existence of such differing perspectives needs to be recognized by policy makers and curriculum designers.

The article “The Position of English for a New Sector of ‘Japanese’ Youths: Mixed-Ethnic Girls’ Constructions of Linguistic and Ethnic Identities” by Laurel Kamada focuses on how mixed ethnic youths are confronted by narratives on Japaneseness, foreignness, and globalization in their everyday lives in Japan. Kamada uses “positioning”, an analytical concept in discourse theory, to investigate the narratives recognized as affecting them by a group of mixed-ethnic girls over a three-year period. Positioning refers to how people identify themselves in society according to recognized discourses. The girls recognized the discourses of homogeneity, conformity, “halfness” (the term often used to describe people of mixed-ethnicity), and *gaijin* (foreignness or otherness) as influencing their identities and linguistic interactions. Kamada details how in order to confront these narratives the girls used the alternative discourse of “doubleness” as opposed to halfness which has been seen as having negative connotations and the growing discourse on globalization to position their identities in society. Although this article concerns itself with ethnically mixed students, it seems reasonable to suggest we can use the analysis to see how demands made by teachers in terms of behavior and linguistic expression may conflict with identities held by students on how Japanese are supposed to behave.

In addition to the three articles discussed, I found the other six very readable, informative, and thought-provoking. The scope of focus was impressive, with research presented on how discourses on globalization are formed, propagated, and experienced both in institutions and everyday life. The articles were

sufficiently theoretically underpinned to give them academic legitimacy but also written in such a way to be enjoyable short reads. Whether the reader be a researcher, a tertiary level educator, or curious layperson, there is much to inform on how English is promoted, used, and perceived in Japan.

As the book was first published in 2011, it is already to some extent out of date. Since the time of publication, social media has become ever more prevalent in daily life, and the preparation for the 2020 Olympics has resulted in a renewed focus on Japan's place in international society. It seems reasonable to suggest that these two things have significant effects on the perceived roles of English in the present day. However, this is no fault of the book, and the ideas contained within still continue to be relevant. As a teacher, I would have enjoyed more focus on how such issues are dealt with in curriculum design and delivery, but there is much here to challenge and inspire people in such roles.

Overall, the range of analysis in this book was enlightening and helped me understand the creation, spread, and lived experience of discourses connected to globalization from macro to micro level. Seargent's book helped me, as a long-term resident and teacher of English in Japan, to more precisely understand my many experiences. The book helps me as a teacher explain the sometimes positive and sometimes negative attitudes students have towards English and how such attitudes are influenced. As a resident, I can see how my presence in Japan as an English speaker could be seen as being fitting into a currently prevailing discourse on Japan, English and Japan's role in a globalized world.

Taking the articles collectively, the authors have successfully managed to convey and present the image of a country with an ambivalent attitude to English but one in which English is increasingly recognized as important and part of everyday life. I would recommend the book to the researcher, educator or layperson. I hope Seargeant follows this collection with a collection focusing on how the buildup to the Olympics has affected the creation of discourses described. The book does a great job on showing how narratives on the role of English are in constant flux and it would be illuminating to see how recent events have shaped them.

References

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Author Bio

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