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## Book Reviews

# The Evolution of Japanese Learners in Japan: Crossing Japan, the West and South East Asia

Yoko Kobayashi. Routledge, (2018) (138 pages). ISBN- 978-0-367-37585-0. Price: 5,991 yen

Reviewed by Fleur Ogura  
*Meijo University*

*The Evolution of English Language Learners in Japan* is Kobayashi's first book. Much of the content is based on her doctoral dissertation and research she has previously published in various international linguistics and multi-cultural journals over a period of around 10 years. The book states that it "seeks a better understanding of the sociocultural and ideological factors that influence English study in Japan and study-abroad contexts" (p. x). It consists of eight chapters that are between 10 and 20 pages long and looks at themes including English teaching in Japanese higher education, study abroad, business English, and English learning magazines. Kobayashi describes these themes as "seemingly incompatible" (p. x), which possibly means that they are domains that people do not readily link together, but as this book will show, they are in fact interconnected. Some of these themes, such as that many Japanese people have underwhelming English abilities, have been debated at length in many other publications, and even in mass media, for example, *Japan Today*. However, others are newly addressed in this book, such as the potential of business magazines, such as *President* or *President WOMAN*, to shed light on adult English language learners.

Chapter One and Chapter Six focus on the theme of English education

within Japan, in particular, how it has been historically unsuccessful. Chapter One, Japan's English Education and Students' Notions about English Study, mentions some theories to explain this lack of success. These are the relative ease of acquiring an English teaching license qualification combined with few opportunities for practical training for prospective teachers, education's emphasis on cultivating national identity, attitudes of admiration but unattainability towards the English language, and doubts about the usefulness of English in learners' futures. In my opinion, many of these suppositions are familiar to any educator who has been in Japan for a period of time. In the section looking at students' attitudes to English study, she notes that current high school and university students have experienced earlier and more communicative English education than before, but their attitudes are similar to previous generations. This arrested development is dismaying, and unfortunately Kobayashi offers no solutions or suggestions on how to stimulate change.

Chapter Six is titled The Mismatch between Japan's Strong Economy and Poor English Education. Here, Kobayashi explains how some major scholars in Japan proposed that secondary and tertiary level English education should focus on a small number of professionals who need English for international business and allow the rest of the population to remain monolingual. Kobayashi makes the connection between these monolingual nationals and the economy in the 1970s to early 2000s, suggesting workers who can only speak Japanese are ideally suited to work in the strong domestic market of the time. This link between education and economy is likely to be interesting and informative to readers. Kobayashi then brings the debate up to the present day, by considering the possible connection between poor English education and the current declining economy and examines the exception of certain companies being successful in their English education of employees. Some of the information in this chapter strays a little from the topic, like the comparison between Korean and Japanese parents' investment in their children's English education and the extended summary of the now slightly outdated hit book by Suzuki (1999) *Nihonjin wa Naze Eigo ga Dekinai ka*. Some readers may be curious what Kobayashi thinks could be done to remedy this situation, but she does not elucidate here.

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Chapter Two, Internationalizing Japan with the Help of its Asian Neighbors, and Chapter Three, A New Alternative of Studying English in English-speaking ASEAN Nations, look at Japan and its relationship with nearby countries. Chapter Two focuses on Japanese university students and picks up on the interesting inconsistency that Japanese university students in at-home environments tend to seek out friendships with Western students, but turn to friendships with Korean students in study-abroad environments. The book outlines Social Identity Theory as a possible explanation. Social Identity Theory suggests that in study-abroad situations, due to the physical, cultural, and educational similarities between the two groups, Japanese and Korean foreign students identify with each other more than the native English speakers. Thus, Japanese and Korean foreign students spend more time together socially. This situation is an interesting perspective, but it is explained very briefly, so readers who want more detail about the theory will have turn to the references. It also describes the uneasy cohabitation of Japanese and foreign students in rural dormitories, and the equally uneasy symbiotic relationship between Japanese faculty members and native English-speaking teachers in humanities and social science departments. The similarity between these two different phenomena was something I had not considered, but Kobayashi does not elucidate on why such situations occur or how they could be addressed.

Chapter Three concerns itself with the theme of Japanese students studying in ASEAN countries, which Kobayashi points out is not widely researched, especially in the English medium. The push and pull factors between Japan, Singaporean, and Malaysian study-abroad programs are explained, such as the Japanese government's promotion of such programs and the competition between the target countries to become an Asian educational hub. She also highlights the tension between students' pre-arrival expectations of learning *standard* English (i.e. not Singaporean or Malaysian English) and the English that is actually used in the countries. But, she notes that over time Japanese students' appreciation of other varieties of English as a lingua franca grows. Kobayashi then summarizes her own research into Japanese learners of English in Singapore and Malaysia, which looked at attitudes towards Singlish and

non-white teachers, and also the common characteristics of Japanese students. Many teachers in Japan would have first-hand experiences of students' limited conceptions of English speakers/teachers and their frequent passivity in class. She suggests that this field is ripe for further inquiry, in particular, going beyond descriptions of the phenomena to practical suggestions to remedy the situation would be advantageous. Perhaps this is something Kobayashi may address herself in future research, but this chapter remains descriptive.

Chapter Four, Japanese Female Students' Positive Attitudes toward Language Study, and Chapter Five, Japanese (Fe)male Learners' (Un)motivation in Overseas ESL Contexts, look at the topic of motivation. Chapter Four focuses on females and the positive attitudes towards, and their perceptions of, English. However, they often find themselves constrained by a male-dominant, Japan-centric business world, leading them to turn to working in foreign companies or abroad, starting their own business, becoming an interpreter or young-learner teacher later in life, or giving up on using English vocationally and using the English language for personal enrichment. Kobayashi makes an astute comparison between female employees in Japan and Western English instructors who both have cosmetic but peripheral roles in their workplace. She goes on to criticize those instructors (and her likely audience) as lacking the power and intention to challenge the situation. Chapter Five focuses on Kobayashi's 2012 research into male students and her conclusions: the low demand for English-speaking male job seekers in Japan leads to lackadaisical attitudes, the social pressure to maintain full-time employment encourages Japanese men to stay in Japan, and masculine pride creates fear of making mistakes. She then proposes a possible solution of sending disaffected Japanese male students to ASEAN study-abroad programs (neatly connecting to Chapter Three), because of the advantages of being more financially viable, and the use of English as a lingua franca increases tolerance to non-standard English.

Finally, and novelly, two chapters look at magazines in Japan; Chapter Seven is about Japanese Business Magazines' Special Issues on English Study Methods: A Window on the Division between Japan's Business World and Formal Schooling, and Chapter Eight is titled Japanese Women's Magazines' Articles

about English Study: A Window on Japanese Women's Status in the Business World. To my knowledge, magazines have not been utilized as a resource to investigate engagement in studying English before, and this is an interesting slant to take. Chapter Seven looks at four major business magazines that are aimed at men, such as *President* or *Business Associe*, in particular 19 special issues that have front-cover features on learning English. In contrast, Chapter Eight looks at the two business magazines that are aimed at women, *President WOMAN* and *Monthly Nikkei WOMAN*, and notes that in these, English study is usually presented in the sub-heading rather than as a main feature. Kobayashi highlights several features of these magazines, noting differences and similarities between the two and suggesting research themes that could be taken from them. There are interesting connections made between the phenomena of English higher education described earlier in the book and the business world. Kobayashi states,

“Japanese business magazines’ front-cover special issues on English study methods can serve as a window on the nations’ (sense of) economic vitality, which exerts ripple-effects on skills (not) required of Japanese college job seekers and Japanese schools’ (non) global education policies” (p. 114).

Overall, much of this book would be interesting to English educators at the university level, especially Chapters One and Six. These chapters provide a deeper understanding and statistics to back up their experiences of teaching in Japan, but they do not give practical suggestions that educators could use in the classroom. People whose work is concerned with study abroad would find Chapters Two and Three instructive. It suggests that Japanese students need more support from program coordinators to make connections with native speakers of English.

Outside of academia, instructors in various fields would find much of interest in the chapters that focus on gender differences in languages learners. There are many findings that give pointers on how to motivate students in the classroom. For example, disaffected male students like those described in Chapter Five may need confidence-building exercises to increase their participation in the classroom, and constrained female students such as those in Chapter Four may appreciate guidance about how to utilize their skills in their lives. Chapters Seven

and Eight would be of interest to business English and English conversation instructors. The content or perspectives of articles that feature frequently in the magazines are likely to be popular in the classroom, for example, materials that feature celebrities or are concerned with TOEIC for male students, and more challenging material that connects to foreign travel for female students.

What was intriguing about the book for me was the way that connections between the chapters become apparent as the book progresses. These connections between various phenomena that are probably well known to teachers are not immediately obvious. For example, poor tertiary level English education (Chapter One) is linked to monolingual businesspeople working in the domestic economy (Chapter Six), and this is reflected in the magazines they read (Chapter Seven). In this way, those seemingly incompatible themes mentioned at the beginning of the book are in fact very compatible and when taken together create an illuminating picture of English learners in Japan.

## References

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## Author Bio

*Fleur Ogura* currently works at the Faculty of Foreign Studies in Meijo University and in the Modern Management department at Sugiyama University in Aichi prefecture. Her recent publications have included writing and discussion. [fleurogura@gmail.com](mailto:fleurogura@gmail.com)

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