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## The evolution of English language learners in Japan: crossing Japan, the West, and South East Asia

by Kobayashi, Y., London and New York, Routledge, 2018;  
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## BOOK REVIEW

The evolution of English language learners in Japan: crossing Japan, the West, and South East Asia, by Kobayashi, Y., London and New York, Routledge, 2018; ISBN:9780367375850

Japan, one of the strongest economies in the world and home to nearly 130 million people, has been heavily investing in English. However, decades of public investment and continuing obsession with English and Western culture, usually dubbed 'Anglomania', do not translate to success in English language education. Yoko Kobayashi, an associate professor at Iwate University, Japan, examines issues related to English language use and education in Japan in her monograph, *The Evolution of English Language Learners in Japan: Crossing Japan, the West, and South East Asia* (Routledge, 2018).

In Chapter 1, Kobayashi examines the long-perceived failure of Japan's English language education. Questioning whether such a poor education performance is 'unintended result or institutionalized policy' (1), Kobayashi analyses data collected from Japanese EFL learners and Japanese/overseas educators as well as official policies and commercial magazines. She finds that the issue is complex and multifaceted. An interplay of factors plays a concomitant role, ranging from deeply embedded Japanese national identity, prevalent admiration towards English and Western culture, lax higher education standards notably characterised by low enrolments nationwide, aspiration for 'international posture' and Japanese government's discriminatory higher education policies. Moving to Chapter 2, Kobayashi explores the attitudes of Japanese learners of English when communicating in English with international students in 'at-home' and 'study abroad' contexts (15–16). She notes a paradox when in 'at-home' contexts Japanese students tend to discriminate fellow Asian students in favour of students from Western countries, but they make stronger bonds with other Asians in 'study abroad' contexts – an attitude underpinned by the prevalent 'we Asians vs. they white' perception (19). Chapter 3 is where Kobayashi focuses on the phenomenon of Japanese students studying English in English-speaking Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. She unravels how the limited sociolinguistic awareness of Japanese students reflected the perpetuation of the pervasive native speakerism (36), and yet this was not to the detriment of their learning experience given that cross-cultural friendships and multilingual awareness arose rather unexpectedly (39).

Chapter 4 focuses on the positive attitudes demonstrated by Japanese female learners of English. Reflecting their integrative motivation, these attitudes, Kobayashi argues, are at odds with the deeply seated patriarchal perspective in a society that has caused much discrimination against female learners and workers. This discussion is further extended in Chapter 5 where Kobayashi contrasts the enrolment level of female and male Japanese learners of English in Canadian ESL schools, with the former greatly outnumbering the latter. While the learning of female learners has been characterised by rather unclear employment plans (62), the low learning trajectory of male learners is due to factors such as low demand of English-speaking Japanese male employees, perceived social pressure to remain in Japan, manly pride as well as the mismatch between masculine preferences and social obligations (66–73). Having said that, ESL classes in the ASEAN context appear to be 'highly effective for Japanese students' development of confidence and friendship' (76), since they offer a mixture of mono- and multilingual pedagogy, as opposed to ESL contexts such as Canada.

In Chapter 6, Kobayashi examines the relationship between Japan's economy and English language education. She shows that the relationship is not parallel, stating how English language education in Japan 'can afford to remain ineffective for decades' (xiii) and contributes little to Japan's relatively strong economy while playing catch-up with businesses in contemporary Japan

– companies such as Rakuten have surpassed the educational system in terms of use of English (90–93).

Kobayashi turns to the use of English in the media in Chapters 7 and 8. In Chapter 7, she examines Japanese business magazines' special issues on English study methods – an avenue where assertions made regarding English often have little or no academic grounds. Arguing that the phenomenon unravels the obvious void between English language education and the business world (113–114), Kobayashi adds that Japanese corporations' endorsement of non-native English shows parallels with concepts such as World Englishes (107–109), even when they continue to be impervious to the apparent gender discrimination enmeshing the workplace (112–113). Articles about English study in women's magazines are the focus of Chapter 8, where Kobayashi identifies the seemingly incompatible discourses on English as self-enrichment, as a certificate and as a tool for global business expansion (123–127). While the magazines demonstrate more female solidarity in comparison with Western magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, they tend to turn a blind eye 'to the reality of Japanese marginalized working women ...' (128), condoning what Kobayashi calls 'the social institution of gender discrimination' (130).

The final chapter is an afterword. Here Kobayashi recapitulates major themes examined in the book, which she divides into three: gender in Japan's English language learners/users, Japan's English education and its economic performance and native speakerism among Japanese learners of English while posing thematic questions (135–137).

There are many reasons to praise this book. First of all, Kobayashi explores many important issues, which have been either underexplored or gone unnoticed in the literature. Her discussion on the gendered discourse on motivation involving Japanese learners in English-speaking ASEAN countries and ESL contexts such as Canada (Chapters 2–5) is both important and illuminating. Particularly pertinent to the topic is her way of unravelling the level of engagement with and varying degrees of the significance of English. Further, Kobayashi expertly analyses how the gendered discourse on English learning affects the publication of business and women's magazines on English study (Chapters 7 and 8). Kobayashi also addresses an important question on the non-linear relationship between the Japanese economy and successful English learning (Chapter 6), which she tackles skilfully. All this makes a significant contribution to the discussion on the construction of Japanese society in relation to the way English is perceived, used and appropriated. Kobayashi also analyses the internationalisation of education at the tertiary level, which has been primarily shaped by the perceived importance of English and the West all the while seemingly underestimating the growing importance of the ASEAN region. In this respect, Kobayashi's observations of how Japanese learners tend to thrive when learning English in English-speaking ASEAN nations such as Malaysia and the Philippines, as opposed to when studying in ESL contexts such as Canada, are both informative and incisive. No less important is Kobayashi's encouraging research trajectories. She clearly signposts directions for future research – the Afterword, in particular, identifies research themes worth exploring. Throughout the book, Kobayashi is also daring, seemingly advocating against the deeply seated patriarchy in Japanese society (Chapters 7 and 8), although she is also realistic as to whether a change will ever occur (114). Her ability to switch tones in presenting ideas as the contents require makes the book more interesting. Finally, anyone with an interest in Japan and English education in the nation would find the book an enjoyable read, since Kobayashi's prose is concise and compelling. Paragraphs often consist of long sentences but they do not bore. Kobayashi seemingly gave her all in the writing of the book. Though the book is a compendium of Kobayashi's previous studies, anyone would appreciate that she rewrote 'a large part of these works', rather than simply 'reproducing' them (xvi). How she was able to incorporate large interview data consisting of, for example, 14,028 words (66) and 12,137 words (71), into the book, and make it not tedious at the same time is remarkable.

However, 'no research is perfect', and so is this monograph subjected to the adage. Given the breadth of the discussion in which ASEAN plays a dominant role in some chapters of the

book and the fact that Japan is a member of the ASEAN Plus Three Forum, the book would have been much stronger had Kobayashi discussed the various topics explored in the book within the broader context of the ASEAN Plus Three Forum. The relatively successful experiences of Japanese learners in English-speaking ASEAN nations would make an intriguing discussion if the historical ties between them (in which the region was part of the Japanese occupied territory during the Second World War) were accounted for. Using such an approach would have possibly provided a richer discussion on the attitudes of the young Japanese towards their southeast Asian counterparts as well as Japan's diplomacy to balance China's hegemony in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum, of which China is also a member (see Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat 2017, for language in education policy in East and Southeast Asia; and Zein and Stroupe 2017, for English education in ASEAN Plus Three). Further, the deep-seated ideologies on Japanese supremacy and patriarchy have been explored in a critical manner, but further depth and cohesion in their thematic discussion would have provided more nuanced insight. The book could benefit from greater attention to further establishing the connections between the themes of Japanese racial chauvinism vs. inferiority, linguistic commodification, internationalisation of education as well as ongoing patriarchy and women marginalisation tend to stand on their own, without some kind of a connecting thread. This could be achieved by employing a historical/cultural lens to the issues to explain the contradictory attitudes of Japanese who display inferiority in front of Western and European looking learners but demonstrate superiority in front of their Asian counterparts while maintaining what appears to be a highly patriarchal society working for internationalised education. It would probably explain how such ideologies remain pivotal in a nation that is a highly advanced nation in terms of modernity and technology but extremely patriarchal in terms of linguistic culture, hence shedding more light on the intricate relationship between language and identity amongst the Japanese people. A cogent analysis of how English language education in Japan affects its sociolinguistic situation and how it is placed within the broader context of national language policy would also make a highly interesting discussion. Since these two areas of relevance are relatively limited in Kobayashi (2018), readers who are interested in examining the Japanese sociolinguistic situation are encouraged to read Heinrich and Galan (2010) and those interested in Japanese language policy could refer to Gottlieb (2011). Also, a concluding section appearing in each chapter of the book would have been very useful. This would have considerably helped the reader to understand each chapter as a whole and to make connection between sections; for example, in understanding the last section which seems to be disconnected from the other sections of Chapter 4. Finally, for a well-written work, the book could benefit from meticulous editing, given that there are a number of copyediting and typesetting errors (e.g. pages 65, 108, 110, 126).


All in all, Kobayashi has made an important contribution. She has provided a critical and insightful examination of the use and perceived significance of English among Japanese learners and the wider Japanese society. Her book would make an important reference to those wanting to understand the role of English in the contexts of tertiary education in Japan, ESL contexts, English-speaking ASEAN nations and Japanese media.

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