

Book Reviews

The Role of English Teaching in Modern Japan: Diversity and Multiculturalism Through English Language Education in a Globalized Era. (Routledge Research in Language Education)

by Yamada Mieko

Routledge (2015) 146 pages. First Edition

This work derives from the author's experience first as a foreign student in North America, and later as a language teacher in Japan. As a non-native English speaker, Yamada wanted to explore notions of language "authenticity" and "nativeness" in Japan. Drawing on sociological perspectives, she attempts to investigate "the role of EFL education and its relevance to Japan's multiethnic and multilingual environments," and how the nation's racial and ethnic ideologies have influenced the formal teaching and learning of the English language in Japanese schools (p. 5). As set out in the introductory chapter, a central proposition of the book is that "[the] emphasis of English language education [not] only promotes monocultural and monolingual conditions but also contradicts the multiethnic and multilingual realities of Japan in which individuals do not necessarily speak either English or Japanese" (pp. 4-5). This argument builds on the work of scholars such as Hashimoto (2000) and Liddicoat (2007), and her perspective adds further insight into the complexities of English language teaching in Japan.

Chapter Two, entitled "Social, Cultural, and Political Background of Japan's EFL Education," begins with a theoretical explanation of ideology and how it shapes education and reproduces itself. Next is a concise historical account of educational reforms commencing during the Nakasone government, the transition in emphasis in Japanese education from *kokusaika* (internationalization) to *gurobaruka* (globalization), and the influence that policy documents such as the Course of Study have had on the ideological orientation of the Japanese education system. Yamada then provides a brief history of English language education in Japan and the political issues associated with this endeavor. Here, she argues that the "use of English language may be linked to Japanese perceptions of race and ethnicity" (p. 24), that learning it "may create socio-economic disparity in Japan" (p. 26), and that "the image of English speakers tends to be classed, and nationalized as well as racialized" (p. 31). Whilst these points are valid and worthy of acknowledgement, they are not particularly groundbreaking (see, for example, Kubota, 1998), and one wonders what the implications might be of *not* teaching English in Japan. Overall, however, this chapter serves as a solid literature review.

The title of Chapter Three is "Race, Ethnicity, and Multiculturalism." Yamada first

distinguishes between the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, before turning to more contemporary concepts of Maher's (2005) "metroethnicity" and Otsuji and Pennycook's (2010) "metrolingualism" (pp. 38-39). She then provides an interesting commentary on two Japanese terms frequently translated as "race": *jinsbu* and *minzoku* (pp. 40-41). Next, Yamada briefly introduces the main categories of Japanese minority groups, which she lists in turn as *burakumin*, the Ainu, Okinawans, and *zainichi* Koreans (pp. 43-46). Following this, Yamada begins her discussion of the impact that the growing number of immigrants has had on Japanese schooling, and the associated challenges of educating children whose first language is not Japanese. Terms such as *tabunka kyosei* (multicultural co-existence) and *tabunka kyouiku* (multicultural education) are also discussed (p. 48). Yamada maintains that as English language education came to be viewed as the way to achieve "international understanding (*kokusai rikai*)," ironically, this pursuit became "a contradiction to understanding multicultural societies and multiculturalism," as it merely reinforced Japan's view of itself as monocultural, thus preventing "its students from understanding multiculturalism and multicultural phenomena in Japan" (p. 50). Yamada goes on to argue that this tendency "does not support the multicultural realities in Japanese schools with a high concentration of Asian (non-Japanese) students" (p. 50). The chapter concludes with a discussion of an "imagined ideal English-speaking community" in Japan that privileges white native speakers from Inner Circle (see Kachru, 1992) countries. Yamada argues that this reification of Western native speakers "not only limits job opportunities for EFL teachers from non-Western countries but also prevents Japanese EFL students and teachers from understanding the value of English varieties or *Englishes*" (p. 51).

The first of three data sets is presented in Chapter Four, "Representations of Diversity in Japanese EFL Textbooks." Yamada reminds us that that textbooks are "socially constructed materials, not neutral media" (p. 56) that are both controlled and authorized by Japan's Education Ministry, MEXT. Adopting a Discourse/Textual Analysis approach, she examined all officially approved junior high school English textbooks published between 1981 and 2010 (27 textbooks in total, with 232 core lessons (pp. 60-61) to examine both the extent to which diversity in Japan was depicted and "how English-speaking communities were constructed and represented" (p.56). Generally speaking, Yamada concluded that Outer Circle countries were clearly underrepresented in all texts, and America was shown to be "the most important country with which Japan keeps a political and economic partnership" (p. 69). International marriage was depicted as a phenomenon occurring between Japanese and people from Inner Circle countries, a representation that is clearly at odds with statistical demographic data. Ainu people were presented in some of the texts, but in a historical context with no connection to

contemporary Japan (pp. 65-66). The chapter concludes that, overall, while the EFL “textbooks reviewed featured various countries and individuals, and their presence demonstrates that the textbooks acknowledge a diversification of English uses and English users” (p. 73), unfortunately, “the diversity of racial and ethnic groups was not fully expressed” (p. 76).

Chapter Five, “Perceptions of English Learning and Diversity in Japan,” canvasses the results of a survey administered to 163 university students in Japan, asking them to reflect on their EFL experiences as junior/senior high school students. The results support Yamada’s contention in the previous chapter—that lessons paid less attention to the cultures and peoples of expanding and outer circle nations. Tellingly, many students reported that the teaching materials used in high school were largely irrelevant to their lives. Although the survey yielded both positive and negative comments, Yamada concluded that the majority of her participants “did not feel confident with their English communicative skills, and even felt that their past EFL classes didn’t help them improve...” (p. 85). When it came to students’ perceptions about diversity in Japan, Yamada found that “[w]hile the respondents often recognized the issues of prejudice and discrimination against foreign nationals, they tended to neglect Japan’s own long-established minorities such as the Ainu and *buraku* people” (p. 90).

In Chapter Six, “The Role of EFL Education in Multicultural Japan,” Yamada attempts to explore themes emerging from the survey data by conducting interviews with nine of the survey participants. There is considerable overlap between Chapters Five and Six, and, in general, students were critical of Japan’s *juken* system and the negative effect it has on language learning. Furthermore, several students problematized the privileged position that English enjoys in Japan. Many students expressed the view that the textbooks they studied did little to advance their understanding of multiculturalism. The chapter is very descriptive in nature, telling us *what* the students claimed to think and believe. Whilst these comments were very interesting, perhaps more could have been done to drill down into the question of *why* the student were saying the things they were. I was left pondering what the broader sociocultural drivers might be, other than textbooks and English lessons of course, that shape students’ perceptions on these issues.

The concluding chapter summarizes the key arguments of the book. Yamada reiterates the irony that English is often seen in Japan, on the one hand, as the powerful language of the international community, and on the other, as largely irrelevant to many Japanese in their everyday lives (p. 119). She questions notions of authenticity and “nativeness” and problematizes the privilege that is consequently afforded “native speakers,” asking the reader to challenge majority/minority and native/non-native

dichotomies (p. 125).

Mieko Yamada's *The Role of English Teaching in Modern Japan* offers a sound introduction to some of the issues emanating from the intersection of national identity, migration, and foreign language teaching in Japan. While not particularly groundbreaking, several of the earlier chapters serve as concise literature reviews from which to explore earlier works. The work would have benefited from a more rigorous edit. Yamada does raise some thought-provoking questions (such as the extent to which EFL classrooms should be considered pivotal domains within which to teach students about diversity in Japan), and the reader will be challenged to reconsider their opinions and beliefs about EFL in the Japanese context. Considering the breadth of topics covered, this is a rather short book, and as such could be considered for inclusion on a supplementary reading list for university courses focusing on language teaching in Japan, Critical Applied Linguistics, and the like.

Reviewed by Lachlan Jackson
Ritsumeikan University

References

- Hashimoto, K. (2000). "Internationalization" is "Japanisation": Japan's foreign language education and national identity. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 21(3), 39-51
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). Introduction: The other side of English and the 1990's. In B. B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (2nd ed.) (pp. -). Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Kubota, R. (1998). Ideologies of English in Japan. *World Englishes*, 17(3), 295-306.
- Liddicoat, A. (2007). Internationalizing Japan: *Nihonjinron*, and the intercultural in Japanese language-in-education policy. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 2(1), 32-46.
- Maher, J. C. (2005). Metroethnicity, language, and the principal of cool. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 175/176, 83-102.
- Otsuji, E. & Pennycook, A. (2010). Metrolingualism: Fixity, fluidity, and language in flux. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 7(3), 240-254.

Squeaky Wheels: Travels with my Daughter by Train, Plane, Metro, Tuk-tuk, and Wheelchair.

By Suzanne Kamata

Wyatt-MacKenzie (2019) 202 pp.

I greatly enjoyed reading Kamata's poignant account of herself as an American mother married to a Japanese man and raising her family in Japan, and then traveling around Japan, the U.S., and France with her deaf, disabled, pre-teenage daughter, Lilia. We come to love Lilia and her quirky view of her world, often wanting to sketch something or to snap a photo, even teaching us about art and artists, and always ready for a gourmet meal in an exotic setting with her mother. Lilia is a savvy, courageous pre-teen with a robust personal agency; she knows what she wants and where she'd like to go next. Her American mother tries to educate her daughter by opening her to a world larger than just rural Japan.

Kamata is a professional writer, making this at least her ninth published book so far, many of the others fiction. She also has won many awards for her short stories.

First, we go with mother and daughter in wheelchair around the rural Japanese island of Shikoku and around Tokushima, the prefecture where they reside. Lilia is a greatly enthusiastic travel partner for Kamata, which allows for mother-daughter bonding, as well as fulfilling the mother's desire to travel to Paris, one of the most exotic, interesting places in Europe, and to share experiences with her daughter. Lilia's father often appears during the forays around Japan, but Kamata then boldly goes off to Paris alone with her disabled child in a wheelchair. I felt that Kamata is very courageous to attempt this as I personally am afraid to go anywhere by myself in my wheelchair, even in Japan, as there are too many unknowns about accessibility and other problems when setting out in a wheelchair. We feel their vulnerability throughout and this builds a bit of tension in the narrative, which is resolved by their safe return home.

Early in the book, during their travels inside of Japan there were many things mentioned that I could easily relate to, having myself also experienced. Educators try to tell the mother, Kamata, something that we who reside in Japan with mixed ethnic children have all heard: that *we should not try to raise our children bilingually, as it might hinder their acquisition of Japanese*.

Fortunately, Kamata knows better and tries to teach her child the three languages that she will likely need in her life: English, Japanese, and JSL (Japanese Sign Language). Although Kamata does not write about how she herself came to acquire JSL, it seems that she is quite proficient in it and it serves as the main language of communication with her deaf daughter.

Lilia gets a cochlear implant to be able to hear spoken languages, and educators try to tell Kamata that “it would be too difficult for a deaf child to learn two spoken languages at once” (p. 20). This seems like an understatement; Kamata writes, “I suppose I could have refused, but I didn’t feel qualified to take on her education all by myself. I needed outside support. I also knew that we would be living in Japan for a long time, and that my daughter needed to learn how to function in this country. I started speaking to Lilia in Japanese, but I continued to use only English with my son” (p. 21).

As a foreigner who has also raised a mixed ethnic child in Japan and as a disabled person myself, needing to use a wheelchair, I found many things to relate with in this book. One theme in the book that particularly resonated with me was the problem of *accessibility* for wheelchair users and how often, when one finds themselves in inhospitable situations, there are people who emerge to help out, although not always.

Most people, even owners of hotels and other public buildings, seem to have a very low consciousness of *accessibility* for people who move around in wheelchairs and require a ramp-like roll-over structure to assure that they can easily enter and exit. Also, many buildings do not even have elevators. And in some of those that do, they are often in the back of the building and used for moving goods; so sometimes just finding one’s way to the proper elevator can be a very roundabout path through narrow back rooms. I have also had the experience of wanting to enter a particular place and finding it entailed getting up out of my wheelchair and maneuvering up and then down dangerous steps. Someone else is then needed to carry the wheelchair up, and then later down.

Also, mothers cannot just temporarily leave their disabled child sitting somewhere while they run and take care of some problem. I often felt the poignant stress, along with the author and her daughter, of being stuck somewhere when their accessibility was hampered. Sometimes there is no other option except to give up, as Kamata writes: “Maybe there are some places that Lilia in her wheelchair, and me with her, can do without visiting” (p. 75).

Calling ahead to make sure that a certain hotel, museum, restaurant, and so forth will be accessible is not always a reliable approach and can potentially cause much stress upon arriving at a place after a long trip if it turns out not to be accessible. I too have encountered this many times. Also, sometimes the interpretation of *accessible* differs among people. I have gone to places in Japan that considered a toilet to be accessible if it was a Western-type sit-down toilet, as opposed to a traditional Japanese squat toilet, which is probably one of the reasons why we have seldom seen handicapped children and their mothers going around Japan until quite recently. Even in such public places as McDonald’s, Kamata writes of *pitstops*: “One is at a McDonald’s where I find the toilet and soap dispenser in the ‘accessible’ toilet are too high for a wheelchair to reach” (p. 69).

The title, *Squeaky Wheels*, conjures up the proverb, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” rather than the actual noise made by her daughter’s wheelchair. Kamata writes: “I am often torn between wanting to do everything myself as a fiercely independent American, and wanting to ask for help, between being the squeaky wheel pointing out the injustices in the system and not wanting to make waves” (p. 68). This resonated with me strongly as I too often find myself needing to be a squeaky wheel in a society where such protruding nails often get hammered down.

Anyone who has raised a child in Japan knows the difficulty that mothers face when taking their child out alone with limited language skills. But we soon learn that Kamata is fluent not only in English and Japanese, but also in JSL, along with a working knowledge of a few other languages, such as French and probably a bit of ASL (American Sign Language). I was very impressed by how the author is able to communicate with her deaf daughter using JSL, which is not an easy language to master. As JSL and ASL are two entirely different languages, I felt that it is unfortunate that no Universal Sign Language (USL) exists, having a single shared grammar with words added specific to each culture that all deaf people all over the world could use to communicate with each other.

Lila is a twin, with a hearing twin brother, Jio. They were born as *micro-preemies* (= a premature baby weighing less than 800 grams) which seems to have been a cause of Lilia’s deafness. As Lilia’s twin has full hearing ability, Kamata has needed to use two different languages to communicate with her two children.

The book gives the reader a fascinating travel guide around Paris and one learns about art and artists there along with Kamata and her daughter. For example, even Lilia knew that Monet had cataracts on his eyes, which must account for the fuzzy look of many of his paintings of water lilies and other things. (Lilia might also be interested to learn that the famous German musician-composer, Beethoven, went deaf but still was able to compose many of his best works after losing his hearing.)

I highly recommend this book to anyone residing in Japan, and especially to people who are raising children bi/multi-lingually here. Furthermore, the book speaks very well to disabled people and to parents of disabled children and the many social and infrastructural impediments to getting around and entering public places, including schools and other places that we take for granted.

In summary, I felt that this book is very easy to identify with, both as the mother of a mixed-ethnic child in Japan who I raised multilingually and multiculturally, and as an impaired person myself using a wheelchair. Kamata’s story goes well beyond the borders of Japan and we view problems of communication and accessibility as a global problem. I

sense Kamata's mission of advocacy for accessibility in her narrative and I totally support her on that issue.

*Reviewed by Laurel Kamada
(retired Professor, Tohoku University)*