

Book Review

Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese women on the move

Kimie Takahashi. Multilingual Matters, 2013. 181 pp. ISBN 978-1-84769-854-4

Reviewed by:

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In his analysis of identity construction in study abroad settings, Block (2007) calls for “a broadening of what identity means and the range of subject positions explored in research” (p. 185). Similarly, half a decade later, Coleman (2013) urges researchers to go beyond a simplistic dichotomy of language learners and native speakers when examining identity in such contexts. In light of this, Takahashi’s book, based on her longitudinal, ethnographic research on five Japanese women who travelled to Australia for their study abroad programmes (called *ryugaku* in the book), makes an invaluable contribution by revealing the complexity of identity construction of her participants. The author does this by showing how desire for English and the West, which can be observed in sociohistorical and media discourses in Japan, serves as motivation for the participants, shapes their language acquisition process and enables the emergence of bilingual international subjectivities in them.

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundation of the book by drawing on anthropologists’ research on the desire for the West among middle-class Japanese women. The author proposes to examine the experience of *ryugaku* in terms of “language desire” (p. 6), arguing that this desire should go beyond economic benefits to including other desires, such as desire “for friendship/romance with a speaker of the desired language” (p. 7). This discussion is followed by a critical discourse analysis of media discourses of English language learning in Chapter 2. Examining a selection of English learning related articles in women magazines and promotional materials for English conversational schools and *ryugaku*, the author identifies a conflation of interracial, heterosexual romance and English language learning, with white men often positioned as friendly teachers and Japanese women consumers of western masculinity. Chapter 3 investigates the participants’ motivation to engage in *ryugaku*. Apart from the participants’ desire to reinvent their identity, a number of factors including “traditional discourse of women’s life cycles (e.g. education, career and marriage) and age” (p. 62) were also involved.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the way in which the participants’ desired and “ought-to-be selves” (p. 89) as proficient English speakers was or was not supported in their *ryugaku* experiences. Chapter 4, entitled “Desired Interlocutors”, shows how socialising with white native speaking men was perceived as a more effective way of language learning than traditional methods (e.g. watching television). However, the author suggests that her participants’ communication with native speaking men is often “a site of identity negotiation” (p. 141) by analysing when her participants chose to (or not to)

talk to an English-speaking man. Chapter 5 reveals how two domains, home and workplace, shaped the English learning experiences of the participants. Despite their desire for integrating into an English-speaking community, their decisions were shown to be motivated and affected by “non-linguistic desires and power relations experienced in particular contexts” (p. 110). Although the participants’ improvement in communicative competence is not the main focus of the book, these chapters show that gender could be a shaping factor of a person’s communicative competence in study abroad contexts.

Chapter 6 is about the change in identity at the later stage of *ryugaku*. Rather than returning to Japan, which is often assumed in the promotional materials, the emergent hybrid identity as bilingual Japanese with overseas exposure gave rise to the participants’ desire to seek permanent residence outside Japan, as they perceived there would be little recognition of their bilingual, international identity in their home country. The final chapter, Chapter 7, offers a conceptualisation of language desire, presenting an analytical framework that enables future researchers to “theorise the ways in which historically and commercially promoted language desire intersects with language learners’ migratory intentions, and how such desires may shape their access and approaches to language learning, socialisation and employment opportunities in a given country” (p. 158).

In sum, the book succeeds in exploring the multifaceted identities of the participants by examining their experiences in study abroad contexts and by capturing the emergence of target language mediated subjectivities in the participants. It may be questioned whether the romanticised link between English and white men in Japan is generalizable to other contexts. However, the book successfully demonstrates the unique motivation for language learning for each participant, reminding researchers that the social aspect of motivation should not simply be reduced to economic and social advancement. By comparing the ideal learning experience depicted in the promotional materials of English conversation schools and *ryugaku* with the real life experience of the participants, the author not only shows the pervasiveness of the commodification of English in Japan, but also calls into question some generalisations (e.g. studying abroad is an effective way for learning a foreign language) that may circulate even in the language classroom. The book is of great value to English teachers in Japan and researchers in study abroad programmes, and also to researchers who look for a gender sensitive approach to identity and motivation in second language acquisition.

About the reviewer

Eleanor K. P. Kwan is a lecturer at the Centre for Applied English Studies, the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests are student writing and writer identity.

References

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