

Book Review

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The Idea of English in Japan: Ideology and the Evolution of a Global Language. Philip Seargeant. Series: Critical Language and Literacy Studies. Bristol, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters, 2009, 208 pages. ISBN: 9781847692016.

Written by a lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the Open University's Centre for Language and Communication who has extensively investigated the study of world Englishes, partially through his time working in Japanese higher education, this book examines the situation of English Language in Japan in a broader context. It does not focus on English language teaching in Japanese schools, but it refers to the use of English in the whole country.

This work consists of nine chapters through which Philip Seargeant provides interesting food-for-thought on the idea of English as a concept in Japan. It also helps the reader understand why Japan constitutes a peculiar case for this kind of study. Chapters 2 to 9 are preceded by a thorough introduction in Chapter 1 where the author places English language study in the specific Japanese context.

The author clearly exposes his focus of interest in this book by stating that he will be examining "the way in which a particular language accrues specific cultural meaning within a society, and how this then acts as a determining cultural force in its own right, while also creating the context within which people approach that language in that society." (p.29). In order to achieve this main objective, Seargeant analyzed the discourses on English within Japan by studying official statements, academic discussions and curriculum designs. The author also carefully analyzed promotional texts and organizational practices of public and private educational organizations, such as universities and language schools, as well as the use of English within artistic and popular culture.

Chapter 2 explains the theoretical approaches of the study: English as a Universal language (p. 7) and the Lingua franca approach (p.11). Seargeant hypothesizes that "the conceptualizations of English that exist are not arbitrary in terms of their historical and political genealogy, and are thus likely to be significant in terms of the cultural work they perform" (p.20).

In Chapter 3, the author analyzes the issues raised in the previous chapter by exposing the ways in which the "world englishes" approach (p.23) have looked at the issue of language ideology, and how it provides a framework for the study of the specific case of Japan. Towards the end of the chapter the author clearly exposes the methodology and objects of analysis.

The following chapter goes deeper into the specific situation of English in Japan, its status. He identifies several issues in this aspect relating it to the historical context and the "internationalism" (p.53). Without going into much detail, the author provides a brief overview of the practice and policy of English language teaching in Japan. He sees the need to "consider the ways in which the language is conceptualized from different perspectives within society" (p.62). Thus, we enter into Chapter 5 which provides conceptual case studies dealing more specifically with the impact of globalization in Japan through English. In this chapter the author examines the relation between English language and Japanese culture.

Chapters 6 to 8 continue providing more conceptual case studies, examining the issue of "authenticity" (p.91). Seargeant summarizes this issue explaining that the claim to authenticity as it is used in ELT theory invokes an authority which would stabilize or legitimize its object. (p.105).

Chapter 7 explores the personal relationship between individual and language: a desire for English, motivation and language learning, attitudes towards English. One of the findings in the data by the author is that according to the responses received regarding Japanese people motivation for learn-

ing English “several of the ambitions have little or no direct relationship to English ability, but are general desires about lifestyle change.” (p.112). Another main finding was that “the pursuit of English in Japan becomes a means of expressing one’s identity and of negotiating aspects of one’s native culture”. (p.131). The English language use in Japan is not as in its neighbouring countries in Asia. English is necessary if one wants to communicate with the rest of the world, but the great majority of Japanese cope well in their jobs and their daily lives without requiring any knowledge or use of English. English language competency is not a prerequisite for finding stable work and decent wages. (p. 121). Therefore, as long as they plan to stay in Japan, Japanese usually do not see English learning as “a must”. It becomes rather a hobby, a fun thing to do in your spare time.

In chapter 8 the author concludes the examination of the Japanese context with a look at how the discourse of English in Japan works not only to assign conceptual meanings to the language, but also to shape what does and does not count as “English” in Japan.

In chapter 9, as previously announced in the book, Seargeant returns to the issue of the broader concept of English as a global language and the implications of teaching this language in the Japanese context. He concludes that we do need to consider English as a Global Language as “a composite of function and concept which gains its meaning and value from the mediating role it plays in the social lives of people who understand their lives to be lived in a global context.” (pp.167-168).

Even though this work does not focus on the much debated topic of English language teaching in specific Japanese contexts such as elementary, secondary schools and universities, Seargeant makes a brief literature review about studies on English teaching in Japan in chapter 4 (pp. 45-48). Readers will definitely appreciate Phillip Seargeant’s insight analysis on how English is perceived in Japan. This research will be useful for English teachers in Japan, as it will help them to know more about the learners’ perception of the language they are learning, and why they are learning it. The work makes an essential contribution to the understanding and future research on the status of English placed in a broader context within Japan and outside Japanese classrooms.