

Reviews

Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts.
Amy B. M. Tsui and James W. Tollefson (Eds.). Mahwah,
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This book addresses Asian policy responses to the challenges posed by globalization and the concomitant need for English, both as a medium of international communication and as the primary language of information technology. Tsui and Tollefson point out that language policy subsumes the three areas of language planning, language ideology, and language practice. The 14 articles in the book focus on these three themes. The chapters on Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Cambodia address the extent to which policy manages the potentially deleterious impact of the spread of English on indigenous languages and the cultural values and belief systems they embody, while promoting its positive benefits. The chapters on Hong Kong, Brunei, and New Zealand examine the relations between language and the construction of cultural identities. The chapters on India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh explore the role of English in environments where there has emerged local resistance to linguistic homogenization. Each chapter has its merits. However, I will focus on the chapter of most relevance for *JALT Journal* readers.

Kayoko Hashimoto's contention in the chapter "Japan's language policy and the lost decade" is that "Japanese education is designed to reduce the danger of dependency on the West by restricting the introduction of Western ideas to technical matters" (p. 26). Hashimoto argues that Japanese policy is intended less to promote the official goal of ensuring that "all Japanese acquire a working knowledge of English," than to promote "Japaneseness" (p. 27). This is not a new concern. Former U.S. Ambassador to Japan (1966-1969) U. Alexis Johnson recalled the Japanese Vice Minister of Education encouraging school children to "learn foreign languages but not learn them too well, because their souls were embodied in their knowledge of Japanese" (1984, p. 459). There appears to be something of this fear in current policy prescriptions. Languages embody

cultural beliefs and values, and influence behavior. Social distinctions that are encoded in one language may not be in another. English carries the worldview and national practices of the Anglo-American world and as such potentially endangers indigenous cultures. Thus, Japanese official policy seems ambivalent between wanting the benefits of English while fearing the consequences of "too much" English.

As of March 2007, virtually all Japanese elementary schools (96%) offer some English instruction, in the form of songs, games, greetings, self-introductions, or pronunciation drills. The instruction is provided by homeroom teachers and amounts to 14.8 hours per year. Approximately 95% of these teachers lack qualifications as language instructors. However, Education Minister Bunmei Ibuki has recently expressed the view that Japanese students should first perfect their speaking and writing skills in their mother tongue before tackling a foreign language (Most Elementary Schools, 2007), which seems to imply a subtractive theory of second language acquisition, such that the second language impedes development of the native language, precisely as suggested by the official quoted by Johnson above.

In view of the official ambivalence, it is difficult to imagine schools devoting the resources needed to overcome more immediate and practical difficulties, such as the lack of qualified teachers and limited classroom time. Hashimoto's conclusion is that the Japanese government's policy is in fact a successful response to the perceived challenge posed by English, and that broadly based competence in communicative English is not an official objective.

Interestingly, Yim Sungwon arrives at essentially the same conclusion regarding South Korea based on a content analysis of middle school textbooks, and many of the other articles suggest that official ambivalence toward English is not confined to Japan.

Tsui and Tollefson's introductory chapter does a good job of putting the subsequent contributions in perspective. However, although a wide variety of Asian countries are surveyed, the situations in Thailand, Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China are neglected. Despite this, overall the collection is a useful addition to the literature on language policy in Asia.

References

- Johnson, U. A. (1984). *The right hand of power*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Most elementary schools teach English. (2007, March 3). *The Japan Times*, p. 2.