Review Article

*Sociology of English Language and the Japanese: Why Do We Have So Many Misunderstandings about English Education?*¹

TERASAWA, Takunori
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With the spread of the English language around the world and its usage in political, economic, and certainly in information and communication arenas, it would seem that not being capable of using the language means that a nation is doomed to fail in international competition. At an individual level, English is a high-stakes subject in Japanese schools; thus it is crucial to success in one's educational career. In business, it became news when leading Japanese companies such as Rakuten and Uniqlo announced the introduction of English as their in-house language. In the realm of education, a suggestion has been made very recently that English be introduced at an even earlier stage in formal education than it is at present and its status be upgraded into a formal subject² (Miki, 2015). In short, 'English' is not a trivial matter in Japan.

One characteristic of discussions and discourses related to the English language in Japan is that many are ideological. 'The Japanese are not good at English', 'English is a must for the workers', and 'salary will increase with English proficiency' (p. iii)³: these are some of the examples the author finds utterly unsatisfying. Interestingly, by utilising large-scale data sets and conducting statistical analyses, the thrust of the book is to challenge such established ideas, beliefs, and discourses about the Japanese and the English language, showing that they are mistaken and based on flimsy evidence. It is intended to make use of the results to develop more effective educational policies, as well as to contribute to academic debate.

The book consists of four parts. The first part examines discourses related to proficiency in and use of English by Japanese people. It demonstrates that only a very low proportion of Japanese workers possess an advanced command of English (chapter 1), and that opportunities to acquire this depend on class and gender (chapter 2). A comparative analysis examines the English skills of Japanese by comparison with their Asian neighbours (chapter 3), showing that although the Japanese as a whole are not egregiously poor in their English skills, the relatively poor command of English amongst prominent public figures such as politicians may reinforce an

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image of low proficiency in society at large. Finally, Terasawa uncovers an extremely low level of *use* of English by Japanese, whether for professional or leisure-related purposes (chapter 4). Not all of these findings are particularly new nor are they original, but the statistical data give us a clearer picture of the relationship between Japanese people and the English language.

A cluster of chapters in the second part examines various discourses related to language. The author first examines whether Japanese society is obsessed with English, whether the craze for English is strongly associated with women (chapter 5), and whether the apparent English obsession has been prevalent and a consistent phenomenon throughout the Japanese society of the post-WWII era (chapter 6). In every case, the author shows that these widely current theories are not supported by the available data. The author also analyses Japanese attitudes towards foreign languages other than English (chapter 7). Although more than eighty percent of people showed interest in foreign languages other than English, such interest has not been closely linked to the spread of multilingualism in Japan.

In the third part, which deals with relationships between Japanese people and the English language related to work, a straightforward question is initially raised: ‘Are English skills essential for every Japanese worker?’ Interestingly, the results show that, on one hand, the number of people who need English frequently or occasionally at work is still very limited (roughly less than 15 percent on average), while, on the other, those who *feel* that English is necessary at work is much higher (as high as forty percent). And this trend seems to have been remarkably consistent over recent years (chapters 8 and 9).

Another intriguing topic under examination is a connection between English language abilities and the increase in one’s income (chapter 10). Although the author admits the contents of catchy titles such as ‘*English Rich and English Poor*’ (Ochi, 2007) and ‘*Thirty Percent Difference in Annual Income between Those With and Without English Abilities*’ (Diamond Online, 2012) (both titles translated by the reviewer) are not completely wrong (p.192), readers can easily be lured into exaggerating the importance of this association unless they are particularly well informed. In short, the proposition that the better one’s English is, the more income one receives may appear true only so long as analyses focus exclusively on those two variables. The reality, however, is more complex. Other variables need to be taken into consideration in order to gain a better picture of the causal relationship between English abilities and income. Terasawa’s own analytical results indicate that statistically significant effects of English abilities on one’s income were not detected. This finding is a telling reminder of the broader need for caution in assuming that statistical correlation indicates causation.

Two chapters in the final part are used to analyse 1) components of public opinion that favour the introduction of an early English language education, and 2) the effects of it. As mentioned previously, since the implementation of English in primary schools is likely to be strengthened (Miki, 2015), consideration of the implications of early English language education is currently a hot topic in Japan. The question is, then, how much more do the Japanese need English language education?

Instead of naively following the government’s declared view that English at the primary level must become mandatory due to the demands of globalization, the author focuses on the role of public opinion in driving the Japanese government to introduce compulsory English instruction in primary schools, which became effective from 2011. He concludes that zeal for early English language education in Japan is produced by ‘various domestic factors’ (p. 227), such as hope for a better quality of public education and individual confidence in English

conversation skills, rather than by the inevitable march of globalization. In the final chapter, an analysis examining the effect of early English education on future attainment of English abilities is attempted. Although a positive connection is detected, Terasawa cautions readers that due to the limited data available, the study does not conclusively prove the effectiveness of early English language education.

The book's significance lies in its thoroughgoing critique of discourses related to the importance of English language learning in Japan. It deploys wide-ranging statistical analyses in order to demonstrate 1) how such discourses are mistaken or misleading, and 2) how they nonetheless continue to command widespread credence. Furthermore, the use of large-scale data sets with randomly chosen subjects allows the author to reach conclusions about the relationships between the Japanese as a whole and the English language that are not just limited to small samples or particular groups. As Terasawa points out, 'the importance of random sampling is not clearly acknowledged in the field of English language education and applied linguistics' (p.5, reviewer's translation). By deploying such techniques, as well as providing substantial information on existing large-scale data sets, the present book will constitute an important reference tool for others interested in venturing into this field.

The author repeatedly mentions how little realistic or urgent need of English there is in Japan (chapters 8, 9, final). Indeed, the number of Japanese people who really have needed English up to the present might have been very limited. However, to what extent can we project this past experience into the future, especially when we consider opportunities for economic growth? A person working for a Japanese company once said to me, 'Up to now, we (our company) could make a profit through our domestic customers as well as extending our business overseas in a limited way. We actually want to expand our business to the world and especially in Asia, but there are not enough candidates with sufficient basic English skills to make that possible.' Therefore, one possible area for future research may be in the field of 'needs analysis'. In other words, studies that examine the actual necessity of English within the workplace is vital. Since some case studies exist (p. 160), studies adopting a more macro-perspective and utilising random sampling in selecting their research subjects would be valuable⁴. Another point related to future development is the need for more accumulation of research. As Terasawa explains, he finds it necessary to adopt an exploratory approach in his interpretation of analytical findings (p. 8), rather than to make inferences based on strict verification of hypotheses presented by past researchers. One reason behind taking such an approach is because there has not been sufficient research accumulated to strictly verify the previous hypotheses. To this point, further accumulation of empirical research scrutinizing different factors involved in the relationship between 'Japanese people and the English language' is called for.

Like many of us, the author does not deny the importance of English in education or the workplace. The point the author wants to emphasise is that, instead of instigating people toward an English craze by overestimating the English need, it is essential for one to understand present conditions *properly* in order to devise effective educational policies for the future. I believe this book will inspire researchers interested in all aspects of English language teaching and learning in Japan to conduct more empirical statistical research, and contribute to developing appropriate and effective educational programmes.

Notes

1. The English title of the book under review is Terasawa's own translation as of January 27, 2016,

available online at http://www.academia.edu/10623799/Sociology_of_English_language_and_the_Japanese_Why_do_we_have_so_many_misunderstandings_about_English_education.

2. At present, 'English language activities' in primary schools are mandatory, but it is not an official subject for which students are evaluated and receive a grade, as in the case of the Japanese language and mathematics.
3. The page numbers in parentheses indicate the book under review.
4. A few researches refer to the relationship between work and the use of English by Japanese people using random sampling. However, these attempt to clarify the background and characteristics of English users in Japan, and do not mention the level of English proficiency and the kind of English skills needed at work.

References

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