This book aims at exploring the complicated but intriguing dynamics of foreign language education in Japan. A variety of phenomena—ranging from language teachers’ and learners’ identity construction to specific schools’ or universities’ language policies interacting with various local actors—are examined by 13 anthropologists or applied linguists, all of whom, without exception, employ an ethnographic and/or qualitative approach. This methodological aspect highlights the uniqueness of this book. The majority of the existent foreign language education research focuses on “how effective” questions: the questions of the degree to which a specific teaching method, program, or language learning theory works. This book, on the other hand, does not hasten to deal with these questions but concentrates on “how it goes” questions. That is, the authors attempt to avoid presuming a particular social reality in advance of the study and concentrate on describing complicated situations that resulted from interactions of the social, economic, educational, historical, geopolitical, and demographic factors surrounding foreign language education in Japan. These complexities necessarily require an emic perspective that explores how individuals such as language teachers and learners encounter a specific event or problem, and how they perceive, interpret, and respond to it.

The introductory chapter (Chapter 1) by Horiguchi, Imoto, and Poole sets the scene for the subsequent chapters by illustrating the social and historical contexts of foreign language education in Japan. They elucidate the complicated intertwining of the diverse array of phenomena surrounding foreign language education, and why these phenomena should be explored with an “insider” perspective.

The subsequent chapters (Chapters 2-10) are arranged in order from studies with a relatively macro-level focus to those with a micro-level focus. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the influences of a nation state as a macro-level factor on local practices. In other words, they scrutinize how particular groups of people in particular local contexts have accepted, responded to, or resisted governmental power. In Chapter 2, Lee and Doerr’s ethnography of a
weekend Japanese language school (hoshû jugyô kô) in the United States illustrates the tension between Japanese government’s nationalist policy for fostering “good Japanese” and the community’s needs to learn Japanese as a heritage language. The authors reveal how the dilemmas were reconciled among educators who had diversely different opinions, ranging from principals sent by the then Ministry of Education to founding members of the school to local administrators. In Chapter 3, Hardy, as an anthropologist, reflects his own experience of participating in the creation of an English language textbook for junior high school students. The main focus of his analysis is on the textbook writing process as identity politics among writers who attempted to put into the book their own views and beliefs, which often resulted in tensions among the members, forcing them to reconcile their diverse identities.

Similar issues are dealt with in the subsequent three chapters from the perspective of educational institutions or corporations that are not directly controlled by the government. The current globalization, whether it is an actual or imagined phenomenon, has forced many schools and corporations to implement a specific “global” policy, which, in turn, forces local actors to behave in a particular way. Murata’s chapter (Chapter 4) focuses on consequences of institutional or corporate language policies on local actors’ behavior and perception. Her ethnographic research on international students and bilingual workers in Japan reveals diversely fluctuating views of English as an international language, showing that this “global” language does not always work as a panacea for ensuring academic or business success in a specific context. Chapter 5 by Imoto and Horiguchi examines the implementation process of language educational reform, analyzing the case of the introduction of the Common European Framework for References, known as CEFR, into a specific university. They examine why this “European” framework, which appears to be rather distant from the Japanese or East-Asian context, was accepted as an attractive reform package. Chapter 6 by Poole and Takahashi includes two case studies of international Article One schools (ichijô-kô). They reveal that, although the schools were highly aware of philosophies of global education such as fostering global citizenship, this ideal often conflicted with the governmental and municipal pressures derived from the fact that they were Article One schools and required to adhere to national standards set by the government in order to receive funds. Furthermore, their “globalist” ideals also struggled to reconcile with local needs such as parents’ expectations as well as community sentiments.

In contrast to the preceding chapters analyzing macro-level actors, Chapters 7 to 10 have a much narrower focus: individual-level language learning phenomena such as second language learners’ and educators’ identities. In Chapter 7, Matikainen’s qualitative interview study of university students and non-Japanese English language teachers reveals how the views of good language learners/teachers were constructed. In Chapter 8, Katayama’s ethnographic study of 27 junior college students illustrates the complicated identity politics regarding native-like pronunciation of English—whereas the students were fascinated by “beautiful pronunciation” and tried to achieve it in one classroom, they disregarded it and stuck to a typical Japanese pronunciation in another classroom. Chapter 9 by Matsuoka analyzes nine university students’ narratives of experience volunteering at an international conference, and examines their individual struggles to overcome communication anxiety and construct their own views of what English communication skills are. In Chapter 10, Rosenkjar analyzes the dialogue with a high school teacher who studied under Rosenkjar during his sabbatical year. Their narratives vividly illustrate the longitudinal development of identity as an English lan-
The findings above are quite insightful. Of course, numerous studies have been already done on foreign language education in Japan, but, generally speaking, the previous work has not fully investigated many aspects this book has revealed. This is somehow related to the common tendency (or even bias) in foreign language education academics to leave certain topics unexplored. This publication successfully sheds light on some of the unexplored themes, which increases the significance of this book. Below, I—a researcher who has studied the academic community and practice in foreign language education research—would like to mention two important characteristics from the point of view of unique differences from previous work.

The first important characteristic is methodological and epistemological uniqueness—qualitative and/or ethnographic approaches. Generally speaking, foreign language education researchers, under the strong influence of linguistics and educational psychology, tend to neglect qualitative study and instead often depend on a quantitative paradigm (Benson et al. 2009). However, the quantitative approach, which is often identified as a scientific paradigm that assumes a theory-driven and hypothesis-testing framework, is often incompatible with exploring the complicated nature of local practice, especially its emic aspects, regarding (foreign language) educational and learning phenomena. In this sense, the authors in this book are well aware of this issue, rightly employ a qualitative approach, and uncover a variety of new insights that the quantitatively-designed previous work failed to deal appropriately with. A typical example is Katayama’s long-term ethnography, which successfully addresses the issue of complicated identity politics, a group dynamism that radically changed individuals’ pronunciation from native-like to typically Japanese. This fact could be revealed probably because she used an emic-oriented approach rather than an etic-oriented one (and indeed none of the etic-oriented previous work, as far as I know, addresses this issue).

The second uniqueness is concerned with the fact that the authors shed light on the complexities resulting from the tension between globalization and local reactions. As I have pointed out somewhere else (Terasawa, 2015, pp.251-55), foreign language education academics tend to understand globalization in a rather simplistic manner. In particular, Japanese scholars of English language teaching often assume that global changes linearly cause local reactions—ranging from strongly positive reactions claiming, say, “The current globalization certainly requires Japanese people to obtain English proficiency. Here is our mission as English language teachers!” to strongly negative reactions such as “Globalization has destroyed our own culture, language and identity!”

The studies in this book reveal, however, that what globalization actually has caused is much more complicated than the above. Although every local practice in Japan is without doubt affected by global changes, their interaction is far beyond a linear cause-effect relation. Numerous global and local factors, along with national, regional and other factors, are intertwined so complexly that they sometimes produce various contradictory outcomes. For example, Poole and Takahashi’s ethnographies on the international schools obviously reject a simplistic view of relationships between the global and the local. They show that although these “global” schools obtained a considerable amount of local acceptance, it did not directly result from globalized socioeconomic changes but was mediated by various factors including municipal industry policies, the community’s linguistic diversity/homogeneity, parental attitudes toward educational disparities, local school structure such as different statuses and prestige of
public and private schools, and even contingent events (e.g. the Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, which brought about a huge number of evacuee families, some of whom planned to enroll in the international schools).

In this sense, the fact that the chapters in the book do not share a unified understanding of an emic approach can be regarded as being problematic, rather than a sign of unique diversity. Although all authors employed a qualitative approach and conducted fieldwork and/or interviews rather than relying on questionnaires, there is considerable difference, as the editors admit (p. 9), in their epistemological stances toward qualitative study. Some chapters (e.g. Chapter 7 and 9) seem to focus on questions that are derived from the existing second language theories that assume a rather static view of phenomena, and these non-emic frameworks seem to make it difficult to explore the complexities of the interaction between the global and the local or the identity construction process. This gap between emic- and etic-oriented approaches seems to roughly correspond to the epistemological gap between anthropologists and applied linguists. Although this publication is an unprecedented work in the sense that anthropologists and applied linguists have collaborated together, the dialogue between them does not seem to be sufficient to maximize the benefits obtained from this collaboration.

As discussed above, this book successfully addresses many important issues that have been left unexplored by the traditional foreign language education research. Foreign language education scholars, including myself, should consider the issues addressed in this book.

References