

From the Classroom to the Bedroom: A Review of *Language Learning, Gender and Desire – Japanese Women on the Move*

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Romantic passion, broken hearts, and transforming lives unfold from the stories of Takahashi's (2013) five Japanese women participants as they share their most intimate journey with learning English as a second language. Takahashi's (2013) doctoral research, in the faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney spanning from 2001-2005, forms the basis of the 181-page book *Language Learning, Gender and Desire—Japanese Women on the Move*. The research presented in this book is an exploration of Japanese students' experiences of learning English in Sydney, more specifically, the role *akogare* (desire) plays in second language learning. There are seven chapters in this text, but our review does not follow a linear examination of each chapter; rather, we present a brief background of Takahashi's research, explore the main themes and results, critically examine the implications of her research, and state why this book is important for anyone interested in second language learning (SLL) research.

Research Background

Takahashi (2013) sets out to obtain an in-depth understanding of Japanese woman's *akogare* for the West and the English language through a long-term ethnographic analysis focusing on her participants' lives before, during, and after their time spent in Sydney. By using a set of guiding questions about desire, Takahashi (2013) seeks to explore "Japanese women's *akogare* for English and its intersection with their identity and linguistic practices" (p. 8). Her ethnographic data was collected from five primary participants between the ages of 21 and 39, who were participating in a *ryagaku* (study abroad) experience in Australia. In addition to her five primary participants, she collected data from several secondary informants, including herself: a self-identified Japanese woman. Takahashi was not removed from her study, but rather identified as a "co-performer" (p. 14) in her own research where she constructed and interpreted meanings and realities along with her participants. Throughout the process, she made it clear that she was not on a quest to seek universal truths about language desire and its' effects on the life trajectories of these women.

Takahashi's (2013) methods of data collection included field notes, telephone conversations, interviews, and email exchanges with the five participants. She referred to this data as the micro-domain of desire discourses. She also collected public discourses on women's experience in relation to SLL and *ryagaku*. Although Takahashi (2013) chose an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis, she also used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) when examining the public (macro) discourse widespread in domains such as the media. She did this in order to understand the interactional relationship between the micro and macro domains of *akogare* discourses.

Thematic Intersections

Takahashi (2013) takes a poststructuralist view to inform her work on language learning, gender, and desire. Poststructuralism does not see language as simply a tool to express individuality; rather, this theoretical framework is used to explain how identities are "produced, performed and negotiated" (p. 6) as they are socially and historically constructed through discourse and

constantly changing across time and space. Takahashi (2013) observed that gender and desire function side-by-side in the context of Japanese women's language learning. However, she could not clearly explain how romantic and sexualized desire plays an important role in second language learning. Therefore, she adopted Piller's (2006) notion of language desire as a framework for her study. Piller (2006) argued that language learning and gender role research are limited to its social and economic power and overlooked the idea that certain languages have sex appeal for some language learners. Takahashi's (2013) research responds to the call for a more context-specific investigation into this, by looking at the intersection of how desire for identity transformation, mastery of English language and desire for friendship or romantic relationships with English language speakers are connected with each other. Takahashi (2013) goes one step further to show that public discourses shape Japanese women's private desires and how these desires influence them to learn and use English language.

The culmination of Takahashi's (2013) work is a conceptualization of language desire in the case of young Japanese women. She creates a cyclical model that she divides into two parts. In the first part, she describes the *construction* of Japanese women's language desire, which includes historical contexts, discourse of women's life course, and media. In the second part, she shows the *effects* of language desire in approaches to SLL, migratory desire, and gendered life choices. As readers of her text, we struggled to decipher how she came to conceptualize a model of language desire based on the main findings of her research. We found ourselves moving between her visual model of language desire and the accompanying descriptive text several times in order to comprehend her conceptualization of language desire within the poststructuralist framework of identity, language and desire. Despite this difficulty, Takahashi (2013) provides readers with a critical perspective to think about the intersectionality of various components related to language learning, which include race, gender, identity, migration, Western masculinity, and desire.

Implications

Takahashi's (2013) research carries some significant implications. First, she observes that the desire for language learning is linked with migration; as such, she identifies a dearth of knowledge in international migration and SLA literature, which tends to view international students as "temporary residents" who eventually return to their country of origin (p. 9). Takahashi's (2013) work is unique because it considers the life trajectories of these Japanese women in relation to their language desires. She noticed a contradictory and complex picture in her participants' narratives in terms of life after *ryugaku*: that is, none of her participants wanted to go back to Japan! Yet, the Japanese media discourse constructs and portrays Japan as the "only legitimate physical space for a Japanese person" (p. 115); therefore, it is presumed to be "natural" to return to one's homeland. Takahashi's participants, however, no longer consider Japan their only home and face great anxiety, ambivalence, and even fear when "going home" is an inescapable reality for them—they are only temporary residents of Australia. For these Japanese women, the English language is a tool for identity transformation. By using Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "hybridity" and Mathew's (2000) concept of "cultural supermarket," Takahashi (2013) is able to explain the internal dilemma and pressure her participants experience as these women negotiate their identity and desire in the landscape of racial, sexual, and linguistic politics. By aligning life trajectories and language desires, Takahashi adds an important dimension to understanding second language acquisition.

Takahashi (2013) also illuminates romantic desires attached to language learning by openly discussing the love and sex lives of her participants. In this regard, the desire to learn English is related to the desire to obtain a “native-speaker boyfriend.” Dare we say that one motivation for Japanese woman to learn English is to fulfill their sexual desires with white Western men? By challenging sexual taboos and viewing language learning from this new perspective, Takahashi (2013) creates a space to problematize the unmarked categories of heterosexuality and examine the underlying discourses of power embedded in language learning. She does this by making obvious how the English language learning industry uses the media to manipulate their female consumers by selling *renai* (relationship) English. English institutions in Japan glamorize Western males. For instance, in one advertisement, a Japanese woman is handcuffed to a white, blue-eyed, tall Western man. For these Japanese women, learning English is a means to obtain what they desire: the West and its masculinity. Takahashi’s (2013) provocative scholarship around desire and language learning creates an opportunity to examine the sexualization of English as a socially produced passion—moving English language learning out of the classroom and into the bedroom.

Conclusion

Pennycook, Kubota, and Morgan (2013) say it best: This book “problematizes power, politics, and ideologies hidden behind *akogare*” (p. xiv). In other words, this book develops an understanding of the complex bundles hidden behind language learning and desire. Takahashi’s (2013) ethnographic journey into the personal and private lives of her female participants adds a dimension of genuineness and relatability to their accounts of English language learning and identity transformation. Her engaging narrative, coupled with the use of accessible English, makes her work a must read for students, teachers, researchers, and administrators who have an interest in language learning, gender, and desire. As we reviewed this book, we could make connections with our experiences as English language teachers in South Korea. Even though South Korea and Japan are different countries, correlations can be made between the English language-learning context in each of them. In retrospect, we can clearly view how we were sexualized and racialized in South Korea as English teachers. The South Korean English language learning and teaching industry marketed our skin colour and English speaking ability as a product to the South Korean English learners as consumers. The result of Takahashi’s (2013) engaging scholarship has provoked us to dig deeper into the relationship between language learning, gender, and desire in other global contexts.

Reference

Takahashi, K. (2013). *Language learning, gender and desire – Japanese women on the move*. North York, ON: Multilingual Matters.