

## A Perfect Storm of Curriculum Collapse

Review:

*English as Medium of Instruction in Japanese Higher Education: Presumption, Mirage, or Bluff?* Glenn Toh. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xi + 213 pp.

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Universities around the world are always trying to attract the best and brightest students. Japan is no exception. Completing a minimum number of English courses is a mandatory requirement at all Japanese universities. In recent years, many universities in non-English speaking countries have begun offering content courses taught in English, known as English as Medium of Instruction (EMI). The trend is growing rapidly enough to warrant a study by the British Council, which surveyed 55 countries that have implemented or begun to implement an EMI program (Dearden, 2014). In his book, *English as Medium of Instruction in Japanese Higher Education: Presumption, Mirage, or Bluff?*, Glenn Toh investigates the state of EMI in Japan.

Toh outlines three aims (p. 9) in this book. The first is a response to “more critical and reflexive praxis in education in general.” The second is to expose the conflicting agendas and epistemologies in institutions which affect the work of language teachers and the students they teach. The third aim is a reflection on professional responsibility, ethics, and integrity. The early chapters of the book focus on historical or traditional forces that have contributed to the current attitudes towards English education in Japan. There is a brief overview of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and EMI programs offered in Japan. The final part of the book focuses on the experience of one particular university in Japan.

Toh looks to forces in politics, culture, and power relations to explain the state of academia in Japan. One of the obstacles to the advancement of EMI in Japan appears to be that proficiency in English has traditionally appeared to be un-Japanese or unpatriotic (p. 4). There has been a long history of society or policy makers being

averse to things foreign. As Toh, points out, however, the current interest in EMI is not entirely new. Such a concept had its parallel incarnation during the Meiji era, a period of urgent and rapid modernization. At that time, instruction in English by foreigners was a quick way to gain necessary knowledge. Once that knowledge was obtained, the foreign instructors were replaced by Japanese instructors. Over a hundred years later, in this time of globalization, Japan is trying to be in a position to take advantage of economic trends. In this way, Toh seems to be lamenting the sacrifice of instilling deep meaning and knowledge at the expense of administrators' desire to maximize enrollment while telling potential employers about the high test scores achieved by their students, never mind true thinking skills.

In the third chapter, Toh looks at the cultural history of politics in Japan, including the fascinating revelation, for this reader, that the post-war occupation Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) gave rise to the political conservatism that exists today. During the time of the Cold War, there was no tolerance for overly socialist influence. As such, many conservatives remained in positions of influence helping to preserve racial homogeneity, monoculture, and monolingualism since the occupation. The effects can be seen in the powers exercised by intellectual cartels (p. 35) and the Society for History Textbook Reform (*Tsurukai kai*).

The fourth chapter explores power and ideology with ideas about superior and inferior roles. He digs deeply the into theory of Michel Foucault's ideas on power. He touches on the roles of bureaucracy, monitoring of non-Japanese teachers, and even the concept of *seken* or official gaze by students who are careful not to be too inquisitive, but rather be willing to conform. Toh refers often to *nihonjinron* (p. 35), which is culturally conservative literature about the tenets of 'Japaneseness' and its influence on education:

*Teaching in English can prove to be more problematic than Japanese universities will care or dare to admit unless changes can be made to the rigidities (and bigotries) of nihonjinron beliefs in the boundedness of race, culture, and language. Japanese universities should not have it both ways without being duplicitous.*

Toh follows up on this idea in the fifth chapter about literacy, knowledge and

meaning construction. The high stakes exam system does not foster intellectual development. He again laments on how EAP gets watered down to exercises on the mechanics of the grammar of the language rather than the communication of ideas. In chapter seven, Toh gives a short overview of institutions in Japan offering EAP and EMI along with his critique. Among the small list of Japanese universities offering EMI, Waseda stands out as adhering to the core ideal of such a program. It actually has content courses in English taught by foreign academics. Despite all the praise Toh has for Waseda, he does have one criticism, and that is in regard to the school's requirement that all students must spend one year studying abroad. Why, he argues, does the school deem that necessary if it already creates an English atmosphere throughout the campus? It seems to suggest, again, that English education has its limits, as far as goals, power, or ideology are concerned.

In chapter eight, Toh explores the treatment of English in Japan and the often mixed signals when it relates to policy and education. He notices that there is a tendency towards double-speak in regards to embracing globalization while also protecting against the harm. Such an example can be seen with the promotion of English linked with reinvigorated programs supporting the national language (p. 129). This kind of mentality is coined by Seargeant as a "Dejima mentality" (Seargeant, 2009). English is kept within limits, thereby protecting all things Japanese. A more simple example given is how English functions as ornamentalization in advertisements, fashion, and other media. In this case English words and phrases function purely as something exotic, foreign, and decorative. I know that over the years, many of my students took no notice of the English text on their shirts.

If there is such a thing as a climax in a non-fiction academic book, it exists in the final chapters. It reads like a play-by-play or narrative account of how one school in particular implemented an EMI program. As an English instructor, I had jaw-dropping moments. It reads like a tragedy, and perhaps for that reason, pseudonyms are given for the role players and the institution based in the Kanto area. In many ways, the program was very ambitious, but it was set up for failure due to a convergence of factors. Those factors include the attitudes outlined in the theories of preceding chapters. In one sense, the tragic demise of one institution's EMI program could serve as a manual of what not to do. At the very least, Toh provides valuable insight and ideas to consider for successful EMI programs in Japan.

## References

- Dearden, J. (2014). English as a medium of instruction – a growing global phenomenon. Retrieved from <https://www.britishcouncil.jp/sites/default/files/pro-he-emi-en.pdf>
- Sergeant, P. (2009). *The idea of English in Japan: Ideology and the evolution of a global language*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.