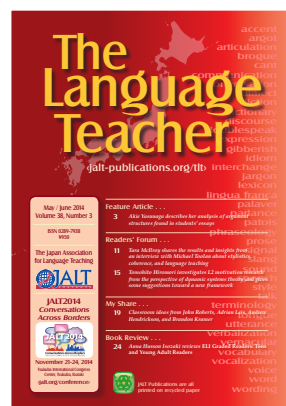


The Language Teacher

The Language Teacher (TLT) is the bimonthly publication of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). It publishes articles and other material related to language teaching, particularly in an Asian context. *TLT* also serves the important role of publicizing information about the organization and its many events.. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting excellence in language learning, teaching, and research, JALT has a rich tradition of publishing relevant material in its many publications.



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often painful—work of cross-cultural mediation at the intersection of the local and the global. I have called this work ethical, because very often cross cultural misunderstandings occur when moral universes clash, that is, when the learners encounter worldviews or actions that go totally against what they believe is “right” and “good” (e.g., euthanasia, the death penalty, or the French interdiction to wear the Muslim veil in public schools). The challenge is how to help students ask different questions than the ones they are used to. Literature and the arts can help here, as well as narrative and the personal testimony.

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JALT2014 • PLENARY SPEAKER | II



Investigating concepts of desire, gender, and identity in language learners

An interview with Kimie Takahashi

International Christian University, Tokyo

Sponsored by the Gender Awareness in Language Education (GALE) SIG

Michi Saki

Ritsumeikan University

and Thailand. She has published widely on gender, race, and language learning, which she addresses in her new book *Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move* (2013, Multilingual Matters). Takahashi is also the co-founder of the sociolinguistics website *Language on the Move* <languageonthemove.org>. In this interview, Takahashi discusses the motivation behind her research and the concept of *akogare*



Over the course of her international career as a sociolinguist, Kimie Takahashi has spent many years working in Australia

and its relationship with second language learning. With many of our students learning English being women, the concepts behind Takahashi's research is of great interest to any language teacher—male or female. Such knowledge can help deepen our understanding of language learning and of our students.

The title of her JALT2014 talk is *Gendering Intercultural Communication – Asian Women on the Move*. Takahashi completed her doctorate with the University of Sydney in 2006, and is now Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Society, Culture, and Media at the International Christian University, Tokyo. Takahashi's research interests focus on gender, race, bilingualism, and second language learning and use in transnational contexts.

MICHI SAKI (MS): Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for the *The Language Teacher*.

KIMIE TAKAHASHI (KT): Thank you for inviting me to introduce myself to the readers of *The Language Teacher*. It's very timely because I'm in the process of moving from Bangkok to Tokyo to take up a new position at International Christian University in April.

MS: First of all, could you tell us about yourself, your current research, and how you became involved in it?

KT: Since I left Japan in the early 1990s, I've lived and worked in Australia and Thailand, and it's my first time to teach in Japan. It's, of course, sad to leave Bangkok after three fantastic years here, but I'm also thrilled to be on the move again and to start working closely with Japan-based academics.

I consider myself a critical sociolinguist. I'm interested in intercultural communication, language learning, and multilingualism, and how they intersect in mediating our lives in transnational contexts. Obviously, my research interest has a lot to do with the fact that I've spent most of my adult life overseas speaking different languages with people from diverse backgrounds. I've written about the relationship between life and research in the book chapter *Multilingual Couplehood* (Takahashi, 2010).

My recent work focuses on the role of language proficiency and communication skills in the tourism industries. I first got involved in sociolinguistic research on tourism when I joined Ingrid Piller's research team at Macquarie

University, Australia, in 2007. Focusing on tourism between Australia and Japan, we interviewed a range of tourism organisations, service providers, and Japanese tourists visiting Australia.

For instance, in our latest publication (Piller & Takahashi, 2013), we explore the value of English and Japanese for the employment and promotional opportunities of Australia-based Japanese flight attendants. I have been conducting an extension of this research in Thailand since 2013 (funded by Assumption University of Thailand, see <languageonthemove.com/language-mobility-and-tourism> for more information). My collaborators and I are currently planning a new project on multilingualism and language learning in Japan as a tourism destination. That's another reason I'm looking forward to moving back to Japan.

MS: Can you explain what you mean by Japanese women's *akogare* for English?

KT: The notion of *akogare* as a key factor in language learning and as an ongoing challenge to rethink the concept of motivation in language learning developed out of my PhD research, which I conducted between 2000 and 2006 at the University of Sydney. I first published about *akogare* in language learning in a 2006 co-authored book chapter (Piller & Takahashi, 2006) and the concept has become quite well-known since then, particularly through the publication of my book (Takahashi, 2013a).

The key point is that we tend to think about motivation in language learning as internal to the individual. However, as I found in my fieldwork with young Japanese women in Sydney, many had begun to "desire English" (i.e., feel *akogare* for English) from an early age and in very similar ways through their exposure to, and engagement with, historical, social, and commercial discourses of what "English" means. In that way, *akogare* is a discursive construction that is always in the process of change. Many of these floating discourses tend to present English as two things: a (purchasable) resource for identity transformation—from being an ordinary to an international woman—and as access to Western men.

For example, many of my participants started to think English was cool when they fell in love with Hollywood stars or Western singers or met good-looking teachers or exchange students from the West at secondary school. These objects

of their *akogare* were noticeably white men. Once they moved to Australia, many of my participants thought one of the best ways to improve their English was to find a native-speaker boyfriend. Who did they mean by “native speaker”? Well, mostly white men. But through my fieldwork, I realised that they wouldn’t just go for anyone for the sake of improving English or of expanding their social network. Nor did they act as if they were inferior to native speakers/Western men. For more details, Chapter 4 of my book has many fascinating examples of their socialisation in the romantic context in Sydney.

While *akogare* for English does seem to turn on women’s agency to learn and use the language and to make a transnational move, I have to say I’ve seen negative manifestations of it as well. When you are so enthralled with the (almost impossible) dream of transforming yourself into a “native speaker of English”, or of finding a Hollywood-like romance with a “perfect” Western boyfriend, your everyday life is likely to be filled with a sense of disappointment and disillusionment. During my keynote lecture at JALT, I’ll try to shed more light on that dark side of *akogare*.

MS: What motivated you to research the relationship between Japanese women’s desire for Western culture and second language learning?

KT: As a researcher and a second language user of English myself, I wasn’t happy about the way motivation was conceptualised in the field. The assumption of previous work on motivation was “if you are motivated, you’ll learn”. This didn’t sit right with me because I knew for a fact that millions of Japanese were extremely motivated to study English—well, who wouldn’t be if the language is continuously presented as the Holy Grail of globalisation? At the same time, there has been this relentless stigmatisation that the Japanese are bad language learners and do not speak up because they have a serious issue with shyness and protecting face—that is, their failure to learn English was entirely their fault.

It’s easy to blame learners and users of English if motivation is seen as something internal to them: “Oh they are not opening their mouth because they are not motivated enough”. It’s not that simple. It’s not rocket science to know that communication takes more than one person. It’s really, really hard, if you have to speak (in any language, let alone a language over which you don’t have a sense of ownership) in a highly unequal relationship. It’s a common experience,

but motivational research doesn’t really reflect that everyday reality of inequality and injustice.

One of the key contributions of *akogare* comes from our engagement with commodification of language and identity in the market place. English continues to be relentlessly commodified and eagerly consumed as a Western product (e.g., American English, British English), while “native speakers” and white men are sold, explicitly or implicitly, as objects of desire to students/consumers. The commodification of English and the ways in which language learners internalise a desire for English is in no way unique to Japan as an ever-increasing body of research conducted by a team of PhD students and early career researchers Ingrid Piller and I have been co-supervising at Macquarie University shows. It may not be called *akogare* and it plays out differently in different contexts, but desire for English has been internalised by Olympic volunteers in China (Zhang, 2011), young Taiwanese (Chang, 2012), migrant women in Australia (Butorac, 2011), and cosmopolitan Thais (Kogar, 2013).

As far as Japan is concerned, English as a global language is no longer just located in the traditional educational discourse—it has become an object of consumption. If English is marketed as an empowering product for women in a still largely sexist society, those who can purchase it will do so (Takahashi, 2013b), but promised results are often not that forthcoming. We need to adopt a framework that will allow us to understand this and its intersection with women’s personal, educational, and professional lives. The concept of *akogare* is a useful tool to do just that.

MS: Do you think the English language industry in Japan is sexualised?

KT: To say that would be a gross over-generalisation but there can be no doubt that “sex sells”. This marketing truism can be found at work in the English language industry in Japan, as elsewhere. Therefore, I think it’s important to explore if, and when, sexualisation of education occurs, and critique its negative manifestation in our everyday lives (Piller, Takahashi, & Watanabe, 2010; Takahashi, 2012).

MS: In your new book, *Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move*, you talk about the complex topics of language, gender, diversity, race, and desire. What do you feel are some significant implications of language desire?

KT: One of the key implications of our research is the urgency to engage with activism for gender equality in Japan (Piller, 2014). The reality is this: Japan has slipped to 105th place among 136 countries in the gender equality list in 2013; 25% of pregnant women have experience in being harassed in their workplace; 22,000 children are on waiting lists for day-care centres; and all five awardees of the 2013 Order of Culture and all 15 Persons of Cultural Merit selected by the Japanese government last year were men (Takahashi, 2013b).

Girls and women really have to be “super-human” to make it in this kind of society. And what the English language industry or study abroad agencies do not tell Japanese women is that English or even university degrees from abroad—that is, their merchandises—are not enough to win respectful citizenship. In fact, the reverse is often true—English language proficiencies and transnational identity often work against Japanese women in Japan as many of the women in our projects told us. I invite your readers to visit the video exhibition *Japanese on the Move* to meet some global Japanese women, such as Kayu Hashimoto, who generously share their experiences.

As a transnational Japanese woman myself, I’m sure my return to Japan in April will present a whole range of opportunities and challenges. What I want to do is to incorporate these first-hand experiences into my further exploration of *akogare* and commodification of English and identity, and you can count on me blogging about them on *Language on the Move* as they happen. For those readers who haven’t visited our website, *Language on the Move* is a peer-reviewed blog-based sociolinguistics website, where we blog about our research. The reality is, discourses of gender, of language, of transnationalism, and hence women’s experiences, change at unprecedented speed today, and I find blogging and online collaboration with various research and activist groups (e.g., *Live Multilingually*, *Human Rights Now*) to be one of the most productive forms of knowledge production and of activism for gender equality.

MS: Thank you very much for your time, Kimie, and we look forward to your talk at the JALT international conference in November.

KT: Let me close this interview by saying how much I am looking forward to meeting language teachers and researchers at the conference in

Tsukuba. In the meantime, I hope the readers will start joining our conversation on *Language on the Move*.

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JALT2014 • FEATURED SPEAKER | 15



Exploring worlds outside: Students as researchers

Andrew Boon

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Sponsored by National Geographic Learning/
Cengage Learning

Project work can be a powerful means of empowering students to take their learning beyond the classroom, to make use of the language (whenever and wherever possible) to explore the world outside, to seek answers to the issues they are interested in, and to suggest change. This article examines the process of engaging students in semester-long English projects, from developing and negotiating researchable topics and equipping students with the necessary qualitative research tools to collect primary and secondary data, to sharing their findings with one another in the final class. It will also describe students' reactions to the overall learning experience.

プロジェクト作業は、学生が教室を超えて学び、言語を(時と場所を問わず)活用し、外の世界を探求し、興味を持った問題の答えを探し、変化を促すための大変効果的な手段となる。本論では、学生が半期を通して英語プロジェクトに取り組む過程を考察する。まず調査可能なテーマを開拓し、協議し、1次・2次データを収集するのに必要な質的調査手段を学生に備えさせることから始めて、最終授業で調査結果をお互いに共有するまでを論じる。また、この学習体験全般に対する学生の反応についても述べる。

As an English lesson finishes, students may walk out of the classroom, re-enter their first language (L1) world, and forget the learning that has taken place. However, project work can be a powerful means of empowering students to take their learning beyond the

classroom, to make use of the language (whenever and wherever possible) to explore the world outside, to seek answers to the issues they are interested in, and to suggest change. As Fried-Booth (2002) argues, "Project work takes the experience of the classroom out into the world and provides an opportunity for informal learning" (p. 5).



This article will examine the process of engaging students in semester-long English projects from developing and negotiating researchable topics and equipping students with the necessary qualitative research tools to collect primary and secondary data, to sharing their findings with one another in the final class. It will also describe students' reactions to the overall learning experience.

Getting projects started

In my classes, I introduce the project to students during the first lesson of the semester. Then, I dedicate time later in the course for students to complete a research proposal for their individual projects. Students are provided with a handout