

Rethinking the Notion of Language Learning: Engagement with English

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Drawing on data from online comments and interview findings regarding self-study English language learning (ELL) books and online Eikaiwa lessons, the proposal that adult learners of English in Japan are often involved in the language far more divergently than what language learning means in the conventional educational sense is explored from the Foucauldian perspective of governmentality. The particular focus of this paper is on adult learners' dedication to ELL to foster the growth of the whole person. Through this examination, the aim is to elucidate the multifaceted and ideological dimensions of what is called ELL. This attempt contributes to offering a more comprehensive view of English in Japan. It also helps us, as researchers and language educators, to be aware of the diversity of ELL, leading to a better understanding of what is behind Japanese adult learners' engagement with English.

本論文では、英語の自学自習本及びオンライン英会話レッスンに関するウェブ上のコメントやインタビュー結果をデータとして使用しながら、日本の成人英語学習者がしばしば言語学習の一般的な意味とは異なる意図を持って英語に関わっているという傾向をフーコーの統治性という観点から探究する。この傾向を的確に捉えることを目的として、特に成人英語学習者が人格形成促進のために英語学習に動む様相に焦点をあてる。その様相の検証を通じて、英語学習と呼ばれる行為の多面的かつイデオロギー的な側面を照射することを目指す。このような試みは、日本における英語という言葉の存在をより包括的な視点から把握する取り組みに貢献することができる。また、私たちが研究者・言語教育者として、英語学習の多様性にも気づくことができ、結果として、日本における成人学習者の英語との関わりとの背後にあるものをよりよく理解するための一助となるであらう。

What is language learning? Although the precise definition varies across studies, most applied linguists would agree that “the most fundamental reality of language learning is that language is a tool for communication” (Snow & Campbell, 2017, p. 6). This understanding is well reflected in the curriculum guidelines released by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), with the junior high school foreign language education objective (meaning, in reality, English language teaching (ELT)) being described as:

To develop students' competencies that form the communication such as understanding, expressing and *communicating* simple information and thoughts etc. as outlined below through language activities of *listening, reading, speaking* and *writing* in a foreign language while activating the *Approaches in communication* in foreign languages. (MEXT, 2017, p. 1; emphasis added)

The above statement indicates that MEXT views the enhancement of these four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and communicative competence as the goal of ELT, or for students, as the goal of English language learning (ELL).

While there has been significant applied linguistics research to guide teachers and learners to pursue such a goal (e.g., Ellis et al., 2019; Jones, 2021; Nunan, 2004), studies focusing on divergent ELL have also emerged recently. In particular, critical inquiries into language learning under neoliberalism have provided new insights into the meaning of ELL (Kubota, 2011b; Martín Rojo, 2020; Park, 2016; Tajima, 2018, 2020a). What has been common in these studies is the perspective that people in the current competitive neoliberal world are often encouraged to dedicate themselves to personal branding and self-development through the act of learning English. The inquiries also note that in a world influenced by neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2004/2007, 2004/2008) or neoliberal psychology (Ratner, 2019), people's endeavor to reach a goal is valorized as well as (or sometimes rather than) their actual English skills. In this endeavor, English serves as a crucial demonstration of the neoliberal subjects' human capital, including their

willpower to achieve something difficult (Kubota, 2011b; Martín Rojo, 2020; Park, 2016; Tajima, 2018, 2020a). To put it differently, the ELL undertaken by neoliberal subjects is frequently intended not so much to increase their English proficiency itself as to improve themselves.

In this paper, in line with these previous studies, I explore the proposal that adult learners of English in Japan are often involved in the language far more divergently than what language learning means in the conventional educational sense. In particular, I examine adult learners' dedication to ELL to foster the growth of the whole person. Through this examination, I aim to elucidate the multifaceted and ideological dimensions of what is called ELL. This attempt contributes to offering a more comprehensive view of English in Japan. It may also help us, as researchers and language educators, to be aware of the diversity of ELL, leading to a better understanding of what is behind Japanese adult learners' engagement with English. This paper is an adaptation of a book chapter in Japanese (Tajima, 2020b). However, the paper differs from the chapter in that I foregrounded Foucault's (2004/2007, 2004/2008) concept of governmentality in the data analysis and discussion of this paper.

The Study

The data used in this paper are derived from different research sites. Because this decision is closely connected with the nature of the theoretical framework on which the paper draws, I start this section with a brief explanation of the theoretical framework, and then detail the data used.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on a larger research project that explored how English and its speakers were ideologically constructed, focusing mainly on Japanese adults' discursive practices (Tajima, 2018). The project drew on language ideology theory, which views language ideologies as individuals' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about language rather than as top-down forces (Kroskrity, 2004; Seargeant, 2009; Silverstein, 1979). What should be noted about language ideologies is that they are both site-specific and multi-sited (Agha, 2005; Park, 2009). According to Park (2009), language ideologies are site-specific because "the ways [they] are articulated within any given site are subject to speakers' metapragmatic understandings of that site" (p. 22) and are also multi-sited as "their articulation is not just limited to a particular site but relevant to many different sites, which may contribute to their social significance" (p. 22).

This duality of language ideologies is important in capturing how they are (re)produced (Park, 2009). First, as language ideologies are site-specific, particular ideologies are involved in the entrenched social constraints in each site. Consequently, by analyzing individual discussions about language in a specific site, it is possible to understand the role that in-site social elements are playing (Park, 2009). Second, because language ideologies are also multi-sited, they circulate across various levels of society. Therefore, by examining people's ideological views on the language permeating these multiple sites, it is possible to determine how these views contribute to the establishment of their dominance (Agha, 2005; Silverstein, 1979).

Taking these features into consideration, researchers who work on language ideology studies often make use of data from several sites (e.g., Blommaert, 2013; Park, 2009; Seargeant, 2009). In a similar manner, I collected different types of data from various research sites for the larger project.

Data Collection

Tajima (2018) accessed three specific research sites: self-study ELL books published in Japan, online *Eikaiwa* lessons offered by Japanese providers, and Japan-based companies with an English as an official corporate language (EOCL) policy. As mentioned above, because the project's purpose was to explore the ideological constructions of English and its speakers mainly through Japanese adults' discursive practices, the research sites needed to be the ones where they were often involved in, and talked about, the language: that is, ELL-related sites. In particular, self-study ELL books and online *Eikaiwa* lessons were chosen as the two largest ELL arenas outside of formal school settings. In addition, companies with an EOCL policy were selected as a domain where English was actually used. From these research sites, I collected the following data during the period from December 2014 to May 2016 (see Table 1). Regarding the interviews with participants living in Japan, I physically met them and used Japanese as the main medium of interaction. As for teachers living in the Philippines, I made use of Skype and conducted the interviews in English. Before the interviews, I provided each of the interviewees with an information sheet and a consent form, and I received oral or written consent from all of them. To preserve anonymity, I also applied pseudonyms to them. In this paper, which is part of the larger project, I only refer to some of the following data, written in bold letters.

Table 1
Data Summary

	Data
Self-study ELL books	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • content from two self-study ELL books • 188 customer reviews about the two books posted on two online bookstores • interview findings from the editor of one of the two books
Online <i>Eikaiwa</i> lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promotional materials from 10 providers • 213 customer reviews posted on an online platform • interview findings from eight learners • interview findings from 10 teachers in the Philippines
Japan-based companies with an EOCL policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seven employees from two companies with an EOCL policy • five employees from five companies with no EOCL policy

In Tajima (2018), for the data analysis, I drew on critical discourse studies (CDS) (e.g., Djonov & Zhao, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), aiming to elucidate language ideologies embedded in texts and visual images. With regard to the concrete analytical procedure, I first translated Japanese data into English, but in the case of the interviews with Filipino teachers, I omitted this process since the medium of interaction was English. I then read both the original Japanese data and the English versions very carefully (Morris, 2015), through which two major themes emerged: ELL divergence from the established notion of language learning and discursive constructions of nativeness (Tajima, 2018). The focus of this paper is on the first theme.

The following section starts with findings corresponding to the view of language learning as a leisure activity (Kubota, 2011a, 2011b). This is because it could serve as a helpful tool to understand the theme of ELL divergence. However, the detailed data analysis also revealed that the participants' ELL could not be thoroughly described solely from this view, because their thoughts on ELL had greater complexity than had been mentioned in earlier studies. To address this complexity, it was necessary to extend beyond the view of language learning as a leisure activity, and a new layer was added that focused on the growth of the whole person, an idea that is discussed in a later section.

ELL as a Leisure Activity

The view of language learning as a leisure activity is based on Kubota's findings (2011a, 2011b) that the *Eikaiwa* learner research participants in rural Japan were not necessarily learning for financial gain or for their careers. Unlike those who invest in language learning to increase their economic, social, and cultural capital, some of Kubota's (2011a, 2011b) participants enjoyed regularly interacting with their teachers and classmates, and others were satisfied with being in an English-speaking space where they could temporarily forget about their daily lives. In Kubota's (2011b) exact words, the activities appreciated by these individuals were best described as "leisure, socializing, or escape" (p. 258).

This perspective was not restricted to traditional *Eikaiwa* learners. Although the number was very low, the data consulted for this study showed that the idea of ELL as a leisure activity was also present in the self-study ELL materials and online *Eikaiwa* sectors. For instance, a reviewer of an ELL comic book published by David Thayne, a famous material writer, posted the following comment on an online bookstore: "I have little chance to use [English], but I want to learn *Eikaiwa* from Mr. Thayne" (February 21, 2012). This comment suggested that despite this reviewer not having a pressing need to study English, he/she took an interest in *Eikaiwa*, which was the reason that he/she was willing to engage with English using Thayne's self-study ELL comic book. The comment also reflected the accounts of some of Kubota's (2011a) participants involved in *Eikaiwa* under "low pressure and low communicative urgency in daily life" (p. 480). This type of relaxed ELL was similarly found in another comment on Thayne's other materials: "I'm learning *Eikaiwa* as a *tenarai* of a 60-year-old" (February 9, 2013). The Japanese word *tenarai* primarily indicates "practice of writing with a brush" and has the expanded meaning of "learning" (Kojien, 2019). As employed by the reviewer, this word is often used in the proverb "*tenarai* of a 60-year-old," which means "starting to learn something new in one's 60s," implying that "it is never too late to learn." While it is not clear how serious the reviewer was about his/her ELL, the title of his/her comment "English is fun" (February 9, 2013) suggested that the reviewer, presumably in his/her 60s, had taken up ELL as a *tenarai* and was satisfied with it (Tajima, 2018).

Likewise, ELL for fun was reported by half of the 10 *Eikaiwa* teachers who provide Japanese learners with online lessons from the Philippines. Student demographics mostly ranged from three-year-old children (the youngest) to retirees in their 80s (the oldest). When asked about the adult learners' purposes of taking online *Eikaiwa* lessons, the five teachers mentioned that the students viewed the learning as a "hobby." For example, Santos stated that "some of [my students], especially the seniors, er, they just wanted [...] a hobby. They just enjoy it" (August 2, 2015). Amanda also remarked that for "[...] older

students, like 70s, 80s, it's just their hobby" (August 15, 2015). These teacher accounts indicated that in Japan some of the ELL adults (even people in their 80s) saw English learning as a leisure activity (Tajima, 2018), which supported the arguments in previous studies that not every learner of English is seeking to enhance their economic, social, or cultural capital or business competitiveness (Kubota, 2011a, 2011b).

However, these research findings raise questions about this learning style, such as "Why do adults in Japan, regardless of age, choose language learning as their hobby?" "Are the hobbyist learners only seeking fun?" and "What is behind their choice to learn English?" To explore these questions, I examined the accounts from Mr. Morimoto (the editor of Thayne's ELL materials) and Osamu (a user of Thayne's ELL materials and an online *Eikaiwa* registrant). The accounts produced by these two participants demonstrated that ELL could be more than "*pleasure and enjoyment*" (Kubota, 2011a, p. 475; emphasis in the original) and should be understood as engagement with English for self-development aimed at the growth of the whole person (Tajima, 2018).

Engagement with English for Self-Development

As an ELL material editor with nearly 20 years of experience, Mr. Morimoto understood that not all adult learners of English in Japan were driven by the need to master the language. On the contrary, he was very much aware of the large demand for English-related books that the purchasers bought because they simply enjoyed reading them. During the interview, Mr. Morimoto stated that "of the homemakers around me [and of] the readers, people who learn English as a hobby are many [...]" (June 3, 2015). In relation to this statement, when asked about his thoughts on why people chose ELL as a hobby, he said:

[Excerpt 1] (Interviewed on June 3, 2015)

Er..., you know, [those people] have desires to improve themselves. [...] I'd say, er..., they don't feel right unless they do something. [...] I'd say they want to really feel themselves growing even a little every day. [...] There are a considerable number of people who only read books and have no particular chance to do *Eikaiwa*, but still want to learn English. I feel that for those people, you know, er..., [learning English] is learning English, but at the same time, it's also self-development, yes.

The keywords in Mr. Morimoto's account were "desires to improve themselves," "growing," and "self-development." The suggestion here is that adults learning English in Japan may be aspiring to improve themselves and achieve growth through learning. Mr. Morimoto's view of these learners seemed to be slightly different from Kubota's (2011a, 2011b) participants who tended to seek joy by engaging with *Eikaiwa*. To further examine this difference, Mr. Morimoto's view was compared to that of Osamu, who was a user of Thayne's materials and an online *Eikaiwa* registrant. Throughout the interview, Osamu self-mockingly confessed that he had spent a substantial amount of money on ELL so far. Below is an excerpt regarding Osamu's thoughts on the current and future directions of ELL in Japan:

[Excerpt 2] O: Osamu / R: Researcher (Interviewed on May 26, 2015)

- O: [Books ...] are vitamin tablets. [...] Er..., not only ELL but the model of learning won't be obsolete, I guess. That, learning itself, provides mental stability. [...] Learning, you know, studying, trying to improve, the mere act of being involved in this makes [us] stable.
- R: Uh-huh. Is it, well, a requisite for growing as a working adult, as a whole person?
- O: Er, it's been imprinted [on us] that we must grow, hasn't it? [...] In the way that growing is something good [...].

Similar to Mr. Morimoto, Osamu deployed expressions such as "trying to improve" and "must grow" to explain his thoughts on what serves as a motive for individuals to engage with ELL or learning in general. Here, it should be noted that his use of the word "grow" in the last part of this excerpt was triggered when I asked him to confirm my interpretation, "[Do you mean] a requisite for growing as a working adult, as a whole person?" However, he did not deny this idea. On the contrary, he added that a moral need to develop had been "imprinted [on us]" and that this development was "something good." Thus, while Mr. Morimoto and Osamu are on opposite sides of the ELL materials industry (a seller and a buyer), they essentially shared the same ideas about the purpose of ELL for some adults in Japan. That is, the learners aim to improve themselves through ELL, and the very act of engaging with this learning as well as (or sometimes rather than) what they have actually learned can fulfill this purpose (Kubota, 2011b; Park, 2016; Tajima, 2018).

Compared with ELL for fun, ELL for self-development has some distinctive features. Although both tend to place less focus on the acquisition of English skills,

they are also incompatible primarily because books play an important role in ELL for self-development. In addition, unlike those who are involved in *Eikaiwa* as a leisure activity, the learners do not always need companionship. In Mr. Morimoto's analysis, there are people who "only read books and have no particular chance to do *Eikaiwa*." These learners differ from Kubota's (2011a) participants who gained satisfaction from having interpersonal relationships through social interactions with their teachers and classmates. Kubota's participants got together to learn *Eikaiwa*, but their main priority was socializing in and outside the classroom. For them, this "social space [...] can become a primary driving force for engaging in the activity" (Kubota, 2011a, p. 475). Yet for the people dedicated to ELL for self-development, a greater emphasis appears to be on self-study. Moreover, their motivation to engage with this learning may stem from a sense of self-obligation that they "must grow." According to Osamu, this rather obsessive self-development idea was related to an act of learning for "mental stability." Furthermore, in this form of learning, books operate in the same way as "vitamin tablets" for the health-conscious. The ELL both Mr. Morimoto and Osamu referred to in their respective interviews could be seen to be akin to something spiritual or something that enhances "spiritual well-being" (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006, p. 153). From the perspective of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2004/2007, 2004/2008), the ELL could also be regarded as a "moral project" (Park, 2016, p. 458) where the learners manage themselves "to become a better person through English" (p. 458). This perspective does not completely fit with the view of learning as a leisure activity for pleasure and enjoyment. Therefore, it is necessary to suggest a new layer associated with self-development aimed at the growth of the whole person (Tajima, 2018).

To further discuss this idea of engagement with English for self-development, reference can be made to Mr. Morimoto's standpoint as an editor. What was notable about his academic, professional, and personal background was that despite his involvement in editing ELL materials, he perceived himself as neither an ELT expert nor a learner/user of English. When asked about whether it was at his request or by administrative order that he had joined the ELL materials sector, he replied as follows:

[Excerpt 3] (Interviewed on June 3, 2015)

An editor wants to edit books that, you know, sell. That is the, well, biggest factor. And learners of English buy books. [...] Well, vulgarly speaking, it's solid.

This response suggested that ELL material development was a promising genre in the Japanese publishing industry, and his intuition as an editor, who "wants to edit books that [...] sell," led Mr. Morimoto to be involved in English-related books. What was behind his engagement with ELL material editing was, therefore, its commercial potential. However, Mr. Morimoto did not confine himself to ELL materials, and had recently edited books on themes, including "autonomic nervous system," "tough mind," "streetwiseness," and "end-of-life planning."

This lineup indicated that his major interests as an editor were in the "self-help skills" genre, in which ELL materials may appear to be out of place. However, ELL can be a mode of self-development. Engagement with English for self-development could be seen to be in parallel with "how to keep the autonomic nervous system in order," "how to be tough-minded or streetwise," and even "how to end one's life happily." All these themes are related to readers' obtaining physical and mental wellness or leading a life of good quality. This lineup of his work symbolically represented that ELL in Japan was possibly an important component of the endeavor to achieve well-being or enhance the value in life, which differed from the conventional ideas associated with ELL (Tajima, 2018).

Through the analysis of the above online comments and interview findings, I have argued that for some adult learners of English in Japan, ELL can be regarded as an activity that fosters self-development. I have also pointed out that it is necessary to consider this new perspective to better understand people's diverse engagement with English. However, whether ELL is for pleasure and enjoyment or because of a sense of obligation to grow as a whole person, an individual's selection of English is never unrelated to broader socio-political and cultural-political elements. As Kubota (2011a) stressed, the seemingly self-determined choice of ELL is inextricably connected with the hegemonic position or symbolic image of English, an argument that was supported by the following homemaker's comment about online *Eikaiwa*:

[Excerpt 4] (March 4, 2014)¹

I'm five months pregnant and often stay at home. What I've started, as a way of using my spare time fruitfully, is online *Eikaiwa*, which is available in my place. [...] Since the Olympic Games are going to be held in Japan, to teach English to the child I'm carrying has become both my aim and dream.

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From this comment, it can be deduced that this reviewer regarded *Eikaiwa* as a good pastime for herself. As she was trying to stay quiet during her pregnancy, online *Eikaiwa* would be suitable because she would not need to physically go to a school (Terhune, 2016). However, from the comment that online *Eikaiwa* was a “a way of using my spare time fruitfully,” it could also be inferred that she wanted a pastime that could both occupy her time and give her something meaningful to do. The latter part of her comment indicated that being involved in *Eikaiwa* provided her with not only an activity during her pregnancy but also an ability that she could pass on to her child, who could then use it during the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Her potential future use of her ELL could be interpreted as being based on the premises that “[f]or business, studying, trading, socializing, or tourism, English is nowadays a truly international language” (Cogo, 2012, p. 97) and that “[t]o facilitate communication on a global level, the default choice is often English” (Terauchi & Araki, 2016, p. 180). It could also reflect the common belief that the earlier English is taught, the better the outcome will be, which has been questioned (Kubota, 2018; Phillipson, 1992). Thus, whether for leisure or for self-development, ELL does not exist in a socio-political and cultural-political vacuum. An individual’s choice of learning English reflects and assists in its global spread (Kubota, 2011a). This line of argument suggests that it is necessary to seriously consider the macro-forces when conducting critical studies into English, ELT, or ELL. However, to avoid falling into determinism, it is also crucial to distance ourselves from a heavy reliance on macro-societal theoretical frameworks (Pennycook, 2007, 2021).

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I presented an analysis of online comments and interview findings regarding self-study ELL books and online *Eikaiwa* lessons to illustrate the diverse forms of ELL in Japan. Some participants were hobbyists seeking fun through *Eikaiwa*, while others were more serious, viewing their ELL as a way of fostering self-development aimed at the growth of the whole person, or were dedicated to ELL because it could be beneficial in the future. These various sorts of engagement with English could be seen to be inextricably intertwined with “the symbolic meaning attributed to English” (Seargeant, 2009, p. 3) and popular language ideologies such as the discourse of English as a/the default lingua franca. Furthermore, the second type of engagement with English, namely ELL for self-development, could also be regarded as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2004/2007, 2004/2008), which encourages individuals to manage themselves to be better (Martín Rojo, 2020; Park, 2016). To put it another way,

the complex intersection of all these elements—the hegemonic position and symbolic image of English, the discourse of English as a/the default lingua franca, and the desire to improve oneself based on governmentality—shows the diversity in ELL. Researchers and language educators need to be aware of these various forms of ELL in order to better understand adult learners’ engagement with English.

Notes

1. The online platform where I collected this comment (*Kuchikomi Rankingu!*) does not show when it was posted. I have therefore provided the date on which I retrieved the comment.

Bio Data

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