

# Article Review

Student's Name

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# Article Review

'Language and Education in Japan: Unequal Access to Bilingualism' is the topic of the research conducted by Yasuko Kanno. She analyzed the level of accession and availability of bilingualism considering the students' socioeconomic classes. Being born in a non-English speaking country, as an international student in the United States, I understand the difficulties and struggles related to developing and maintaining bilingualism or multilingualism. I was required to learn Cantonese, English, and Mandarin from a very early age, and I started learning Japanese three years ago due to my interest in Japan and desire to live in that country. I realized that although I have been learning English from kindergarten, my English was not proficient enough to allow me to communicate in an English-speaking country fluently. Moreover, the native English speakers had a difficult time understanding me which affected my self-esteem. I also noticed that non-English speakers' native language is not valued, as it is mentioned in Kanno's research. Having read the article, I am now able to apply my own experience using an example of how the school practice influenced me to conclude that there is unequal access in different nations in Asia. In this paper, I will be analyzing the chapter 'Imagined Communities, School Education, and Unequal Access to Bilingualism' and further interpreting it as well as questioning Kanno's statement by bringing my own discussion and commentary.

According to the book, Kanno believes that school plays a central role in students' bilingual development as she focuses on analyzing the bilingual education in five schools in Japan. Her major argument in the chapter

'Imagined Communities, School Education, and Unequal Access to Bilingualism' is that the way schools perceive English will have a significant impact on students' bilingual development. Before I focus on a specific chapter, I would like to briefly explain the research discussed in the book. By observing different bilingual education that the students received, Kanno divided five schools into three categories. Two private schools that offer English immersion program and focus on students' English development are considered as those that promote elite bilingualism and apply additive bilingual program emphasizing the importance of both English and Japanese. The ethnic school is categorized as an additive bilingualism, and the school supports the development and maintenance of Japanese language as well as the students' ethnic culture and language. Lastly, two public schools are defined as subtractive bilingualism since they only put emphasis on students' first language (mostly Japanese) development.

In the chapter 'Imagined Communities, School Education, and Unequal Access to Bilingualism', according to Kanno, public education in Japan offers 'either-or option' for language minority students. Students who stay in Japan permanently receive full support from the school in enhancing their knowledge and abilities in the Japanese language while their native language will be left out. Those students who only stay in Japan for a short period of time, which means they will eventually return to their own country, will be able to maintain and develop their native language, such as Portuguese, while their Japanese proficiency is not being improved or focused on. Schools assume it unnecessary to strengthen their Japanese proficiency as they will not be using the language when they go back to their motherland. On the contrary,

privileged students, who are expected to become successful and proud members of the Japanese society, will be offered a 'both-and option' in order to improve their English proficiency as well as maintaining Japanese ability which will allow them to become competitive at the international level. Private schools consider bilingual education as a resource and investment.

Similarly to private school, ethnic schools with a strong ethnographical pride provide the 'both-and option' as they expect their students to form a cultural and social connection between Japan and their own ethnic nation since they consider bilingualism as a benefit. Private schools like Nichiei and Hal, as it is mentioned in the reading, treated bilingualism as a valuable resource, and they can use the target language, English, for different courses. Ruiz states that at public schools such as Sugino and Midori, on the other hand, "[...] our role as an elementary school is to make them learn the basics. In this context, bilingualism is implicitly regarded as a problem".

The imagined community theory by Benedict Anderson, which Kanno has applied in her research, indicates that the imagined community promoted by the school ultimately influences the students' bilingual development with different consequences. In short, the concept of this theory is that the self-national identity is imagined, and this identity is encouraged by the media as one believes one has something in common with people in the nation. Individuals are able to create their own imagined communities by using the connection between spoken languages. The student's identity will gradually change based on the school views on bilingualism. For instance, private schools promote English as the dominant and the

most important language in the world; they tell the students that learning English will help them succeed in the globalizing world. Therefore, eventually students will identify themselves as bilingual since they value the benefits that bilingualism brings them; that encourages them to grow up as a bilingual. Meanwhile, public school students will perceive “their L1 as an illegitimate language” due to the imagined community that the school has created.

In most cases, I agree and appreciate Kanno’s research and her conclusion on the school unequal practices affecting students’ bilingual development. Raising a child bilingually requires that the parents, schools, and communities help in succeeding. Considering the fact that most students spend a great amount of time at schools, the opinions of those schools about bilingualism and the related exercise will greatly affect students’ bilingual development. In addition, the reason that the parents, being mostly well-educated and well-informed, send their children to private schools that provide (additive) bilingual program because they want their children to be capable to compete in a globalizing world. Students who go to the same private school, generally, have the same purpose of learning and improve their English skill. That creates an ideal environment where the students have a similar imagined community and a sense that ‘we are on the same boat’. Learning English in private school is encouraged and supported in various areas.

Discussing the unequal access to bilingualism, one should understand the fact that the majority of students go to public schools as opposed to private schools; and, unfortunately, unequal practices often happen in public schools as well. In public schools, they have to follow a certain



curriculum designed by the education department, and public schools attract various types of students due to the relatively cheaper or free tuition. In that case, public schools will not be able to look after all students' bilingual development; typically, Japanese proficiency is the only thing that they put focus on. Students will not have motivation to maintain being bilingual as they believe that there are no benefits in that if their bilingual ability is not valued in public school system. The accessibility and availability of bilingual programs are limited in public schools, and it is difficult for the students to fully develop as successful bilingual individuals unless their parents spend a great amount of time helping them. However, it seems impossible, according to Kanno, as she claims that the parents of public school students usually spend much work at work. Consequently, students in public schools have a disadvantage of becoming bilingual due to the education they receive.

Furthermore, one of my favorite quotes in the chapter is from Sears, in which he stated that "It is interesting that the term bilingual is rarely heard in international schools [...]. The very fact that we used the term ESL, ESOL, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) or EAL (English as an Additional Language), suggests that we think of second language speakers in terms of their command of English rather than as bilinguals". It happens quite often that international students like me are isolated in schools since their English is not proficient enough. I remember that when I was at college in the United States, I was called 'different' because I was not able to pronounce words as a native English speaker. Nonnative English speakers' ability to speak any other language is often ignored as one presumes that English is the dominant language in the country while other languages are being excluded.

Finally, I would like to bring one concern that Kanno did not address in her book. According to Dr. Juyoung Song, Kanno did not put emphasis on students' feeling about bilingualism. When minority language students enter school, notwithstanding the fact that the education system plays a central role in their bilingual development, their peers or society's view toward their minority language has a huge impact on them as well. Taking me as an example, I used to refuse speaking both Cantonese and Mandarin in public since I was afraid that I might face discrimination; thus, my proficiency was gradually decline until my family forced me to use the language more often. Kanno tends to focus on school and teachers' perceptions regarding bilingualism, but she did not take the problems of isolation and discrimination into account.

To conclude, Kanno addressed both advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism depending on the schools as the education that the students receive mostly differs between private and public schools. Students are encouraged to be bilingual and to enhance their English language skills in private school while the students' minority languages are often ignored in public schools. The way that Japan respects and values the English language influences schools' perspective and their program regarding bilingualism. Many Japanese understand the need for learning English since even within the country, the cross-country and globalized economic environment require them to use English in various areas. Other languages are not valued and that situation created a phenomenon that minority language speakers (except English) do not receive equal respect and treatment with the English speakers. In addition, due to fact that the parents of public school students' do not have much time for being involved in their children's education, and the unequal access that the

students get at schools, they have a tremendous disadvantage in their bilingual development. With the importance of globalization, all nations' educational system should realize that bilingual students (even without the knowledge of English) are a valuable resource to the schools and society as they bring not only language diversity, but also understanding of cultural differences.