Cultural Adaptation and Symbolic Power: British and Asian Migrants in Japan

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Abstract:

This study examines how British and Asian migrant language teachers adapt to life in Japan, a society known for cultural homogeneity and social harmony. Based on in-depth interviews and narrative surveys with six long-term migrant teachers, it identifies divergent adaptation strategies: British participants pursued integration through bilingualism and cultural duality, while Asian participants often adopted assimilation by downplaying cultural distinctiveness. These strategies reflect internalised cognitive orientations shaped by symbolic power in Japanese society. Integration is often regarded as the ideal strategy, but reflects a value system rewarding individual distinctiveness, one not shared universally. In societies like Japan, where conformity and harmony carry greater symbolic weight, assimilation may represent a meaningful form of self-adjustment. The study highlights the importance of recognising context-sensitive adaptation strategies and calls for more inclusive frameworks that accommodate diverse sociocultural perspectives on adaptation and belonging.

Keywords: cognitive orientation, educational ideology, symbolic competence, symbolic legitimacy

1. Introduction

This study examines the adaptation experiences of British and Asian migrant language teachers in Japan, a society characterised by cultural homogeneity and social harmony. While integration is often regarded as the ideal strategy (Berry, 1997), it presupposes an analytical mindset that values individual distinctiveness and multiple identities. Challenging this assumption, the study shows that assimilation, when aligned with cultural expectation, can reflect a socially conditioned yet meaningful form of self-adjustment, particularly for individuals with holistic cognitive orientations (Nisbett, 2003).

Drawing on interviews and narrative surveys with six long-term migrant teachers, the study found that British participants tended toward integration through bilingualism, whereas Asian participants prioritised Japanese and often reframed cultural differences as unproblematic. These divergent strategies reflect a symbolic process (Bourdieu, 1982; Kramsch, 2020) shaped by socially conditioned cognition and structures of legitimacy.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Cultural adaptation strategies

Berry's (1997) model identifies four acculturation strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—shaped by factors such as personality, coping styles, host society attitudes, and perceived cultural distance. Rosenau (2004) proposes a fifth category: cultural hybridity, noting that migrants often shift strategies depending on context (in Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

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Integration is often seen as "usually the most successful" (Berry, 1997: 24), associated with positive psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Ward & Kennedy, 1994), as it enables migrants to retain their heritage while engaging with the host society. However, in societies where norms prioritise harmony and conformity, individual distinctiveness tends to be deemphasised, making personal identity, as framed by individualistic conceptions of self, harder to grasp. In such contexts, assimilation may offer a more pragmatic path.

This view aligns with Kim's (2001) reconceptualisation of adaptation as a dynamic, transformative process. Rather than implying passive loss, assimilation can involve agentive repositioning, a redefinition of self within a given sociocultural framework.

2.2 Symbolic power and the situation in Japanese society

This section reviews theoretical perspectives on symbolic power, drawing on Bourdieu and its applications in sociolinguistic and intercultural research. Bourdieu (1982) argues that communication and social practices function as symbolic exchanges shaped by context and legitimacy. Symbolic power operates when certain ways of speaking, thinking, or behaving are perceived as more legitimate, often invisibly. *Habitus* refers to embodied dispositions that shape perception and action, while *symbolic capital* denotes the value assigned to legitimised traits or styles within institutional hierarchies. These values circulate across broader *symbolic markets*, encompassing domains such as language, identity, education, and values.

In Japan, English holds an exceptional position in the symbolic linguistic hierarchy. Although officially referred to as "foreign language education," school curricula, university entrance systems overwhelmingly equate this with English proficiency. Over 60% of Japanese universities employ an exam system that favours students with good results in Eiken or TOEIC (Obunsha, 2024), and employers often reward high scorers accordingly. Public messaging reinforces this structure, for example, ads like "Not negative, but native!" (Hokuto City Education Newsletter No.68) featuring native English speakers exemplify how English and native English speakers are legitimised. Such representations elevate English as a form of cultural capital. Yet symbolic power is not static; it can be interpreted, challenged, and reshaped (Kramsch, 2006, 2016, 2020; Hua et al., 2022).

To account for such agency, this study draws on Kramsch's concept of symbolic competence: the ability to critically interpret symbolic hierarchies and reposition oneself within or beyond them. Through this framework, the study examines how symbolic power functions in Japan and how migrants navigate its constraints and possibilities.

2.3 Cognitive orientations and cultural adaptation strategies

Cultural adaptation is largely influenced by underlying cognitive orientations. Nisbett's (2003) cross-cultural research in psychology demonstrated that individuals raised in Western contexts tend to reason analytically, focusing on discrete objects, categorisation, and rules. In contrast, individuals from East Asian contexts often exhibit holistic reasoning, attending to context, relationships, and dialectical integration of contradictions. These orientations influence how individuals perceive cultural differences and respond. Rather than fixed traits, this study treats them as flexible tendencies shaped

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by experience and setting. Individuals may shift between modes, adopting nuanced strategies. Attending to cognitive orientation enables a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of adaptation.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study investigated six long-term migrant language teachers in Japan, each with over ten years of residence and professional experience.

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant	Birth Country	Gender	Occupation	Length of Stay in Japan
P1	UK	Male	English language teacher	Over 20 years
P2	UK	Male	English language teacher	Over 30 years
P3	"A"	Female	English language teacher	Over 10 years
P4	China	Female	Chinese language teacher	Over 20 years
P5	China	Female	Chinese language teacher	Over 20 years
P6	China	Female	Chinese language teacher	Over 30 years

In line with the ethics guidelines of the author's university, participants were informed of the study and gave written consent. One Southeast Asian participant is referred to as Country "A" to ensure anonymity, due to the small size of that group in the region.

Data were collected in February 2025 through semi-structured interviews or email-based questionnaire surveys, depending on participant preference. British participants and one Southeast Asian teacher joined in 60–80-minute interviews in English. Detailed notes were taken and returned to participants for confirmation (member checking). Chinese participants completed a written survey in Japanese, followed by email clarification.

The survey guide covered (1) participant background, (2) language use and family language policy, and (3) intercultural experiences. Data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) through initial coding and iterative theme refinement. Key themes included: (1) Cultural Barriers, (2) Adaptation Approaches, and (3) Family Language Practices and Educational Values.

4. Findings

4.1 Perceived cultural barriers

Overall, British participants reported more friction with structural and lifestyle differences, whereas Asian participants tended to regard cultural differences as unproblematic. These contrasts illustrate how participants experienced and evaluated cultural differences in daily life.

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Participant 1 highlighted workplace challenges such as rigid rules, overly detailed manuals, and symbolic meetings that limited autonomy and creativity. He noted that "everything in Japan is meticulously planned, from service to daily routines, whereas in the UK, there is more room for spontaneity." Participant 2 struggled with the Japanese diet, finding vegetarian or European food, especially at first.

Conversely, all Asian participants reported few or no obstacles. Participant 3 emphasized positive workplace relationships that helped build local connections. Participant 4 expressed a strong sense of belonging to Japanese society, saying she now "lives like a Japanese." Participant 5 noted some difficulty understanding Japan's egalitarian evaluation system but found it non-problematic. Participant 6 described cultural differences as natural and emphasized that "mutual understanding is possible with proper discussion."

4.2 Adaptation approaches

Adaptation strategies varied across participants. British participants tended to maintain both English and Japanese in family life and engage with both cultures. Participant 2, however, emphasised cultural distance in daily life, suggesting a heritage-oriented integration with limited identification with the host culture.

Asian participants generally leaned toward assimilation. Multilingual and flexible, Participant 3 showed an assimilation-oriented adaptation, aligning smoothly with Japanese norms and referencing her heritage culture only minimally. Participant 4 stated she identified more as "Japanese" or a "global citizen" than as Chinese. While Participant 5 noted more cultural differences than others, she reported little friction. Participant 6 expressed that following local customs felt natural, quoting: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

4.3 Family language practices and educational values

Family language practices and educational priorities differed by background. British participants used English at home to support bilingualism with Japanese spouses, and viewed it as key to their children's global prospects. In contrast, Asian participants showed more varied patterns, influenced by their spouses' backgrounds. Participants 3 and 6 used Japanese at home as their spouses are Japanese. Participant 5 used Chinese at home with her Chinese spouse. Participant 4, although both she and her spouse are Chinese, chose to raise her children primarily in Japanese. She emphasised intrinsic motivation and emotional readiness in language learning, seeing the first language as key to cognitive and emotional development.

5. Discussion

5.1 Revisited: Reframing assimilation and integration in migrant adaptation

While Berry (1997) defines assimilation as involving "own-culture shedding" (Berry 1997: 24), participants taking an assimilative approach in this study described their adaptation not as shedding identity but as naturally aligning with Japanese norms. They rarely emphasised cultural differences and

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reported little friction, suggesting an assimilation style rooted in comfort and harmony rather than coercion. By contrast, participants pursuing integration actively maintained bilingual or bicultural identities, emphasising cultural distinctiveness.

This contrast seems to reflect differing cognitive orientations. As Nisbett (2003) argues, individuals raised in Western societies, particularly in the United States, often exhibit analytical thinking, emphasising categorisation and individuality, which aligns with the logic of integration. In contrast, those from East Asia tend to think holistically, valuing harmony and contextual sensitivity. For them, sustaining distinctiveness may feel unnatural. Some continental European cultures show greater contextual sensitivity than the U.S.

From this view, integration presupposes a mindset that values distinct cultural identities and conscious differentiation, whereas assimilation reflects an orientation toward relational attunement. This challenges the normative hierarchy that idealises integration and calls for a broader understanding of adaptive agency.

This contrast extends to handling contradictions. Nisbett found that holistic thinkers are more likely to synthesise conflicting perspectives, whereas analytical thinkers tend to resolve contradictions by selecting one. This helps explain participants' varied interpretations of adaptation. Participant 4 identified more as a global citizen, emphasising traits like perseverance and consideration over national belonging. Her account suggests a dialectical redefinition of self, combining heritage and host values. This aligns with Kim's (2001) view of adaptation as a transformative growth. Others did not state explicitly but may have preferred a more situational approach, adjusting flexibly to context without seeking a unified identity. For example, participant 3's flexible, context-sensitive adaptation suggests a situationally assimilative orientation while navigating multiple linguistic repertoires.

These findings suggest that adaptation success depends on how individuals cognitively frame their experiences. What seems like conformity to one may be harmony to another; what feels like autonomy to one may seem resistant to another. Recognising these frames offers a more nuanced view of migrant adaptation.

5.2 Language choice in parenting: instrumental vs holistic orientations

Parental language choices and educational values also reflect underlying cognitive orientations. The British families in this study maintained bilingualism, viewing English as instrumental for global success. In contrast, one Chinese family prioritised Japanese as the sole mother tongue, emphasising intrinsic motivation over external pressures. They believed that a secure foundation in the first language fosters cognitive, emotional, and social development, including later language learning. This view aligns with Japanese institutional frameworks, such as those promoted by the Japan Overseas Educational Services Foundation (JOES), which stress mother tongue development as essential for long-term learning.

These contrasting approaches reflect broader cognitive patterns identified in cross-cultural research. As Nisbett (2003) observes, analytical thinkers tend to perceive the world as stable and governed by individual agency, breaking down goals into components and using tools, such as language, for

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measurable achievement. In contrast, holistic thinkers see change as constant and outcomes as shaped by external forces. They prioritise long-term, relational principles over context-dependent or instrumental gains. These cognitive orientations, shaped through socialisation and experience, influence how individuals engage with education, language, and adaptation.

5.3 Symbolic power dynamics

This section revisits the findings through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, showing how adaptation strategies and educational ideologies are legitimised through habitus within specific symbolic markets. In this study, some participants preferred integration, while others leaned toward assimilation. In societies that reward pluralism and self-expression, maintaining difference becomes symbolic capital, legitimising integration as the ideal. By contrast, in contexts where harmony is symbolically valued, aligning with shared norms may confer greater legitimacy. Blending into the collective is seen as a culturally sanctioned path to recognition, an expression of maturity under the prevailing symbolic order. While assimilation is often associated with coercion or colonial legacies (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), this study suggests that when voluntarily chosen in peaceful contexts and aligned with dominant symbolic norms, it can function as a socially valued strategy. Given its negative connotations, the term *assimilation* may obscure this dynamic; *attunement*, marked by downplaying distinctiveness and tuning into situational harmony, may better capture the process observed.

The symbolic logic also shapes educational ideologies, particularly regarding language. British families emphasised English, aligning with dominant discourses in Japan where English symbolises intelligence, mobility, and status. This reflects a habitus attuned to the symbolic capital English commands in Japan's linguistic market.

However, the symbolic field is not uniform. One Chinese family prioritised secure mother tongue development, not rejecting bilingualism but seeing it as secondary to cognitive and emotional stability. They valued language as a medium for holistic development, cognitive, emotional, and social, rather than a tool for immediate gain. This view is institutionally supported in Japan, as seen in frameworks like JOES. It challenges the instrumentalist logic of language education and repositions mother tongue acquisition as a symbolically grounded educational priority.

These perspectives are reinforced through education systems. In Japan, non-academic activities such as serving school lunch and cleaning duties are formally integrated into the curriculum through special activities (*tokkatsu*), aiming to foster cooperation, a sense of public-mindedness, and social-emotional development alongside academic learning. The Chinese teacher's holistic and developmental orientation resonates with these symbolic values embedded in Japanese schooling.

By contrast, the UK system emphasises autonomy and individual achievement. Tasks like cleaning are excluded, reinforcing a habitus valuing independence, compartmentalised learning, and performance-based success. In both contexts, education acts as a symbolic field where socially valued dispositions are legitimised and reproduced.

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Global and traditional symbolic logics, valuing English for mobility and the mother tongue for holistic development, now coexist in Japanese educational discourse. Recognising overlapping symbolic systems helps explain how families navigate competing discourses. The British family draws on global narratives of linguistic capital; the Chinese family adopts a developmentally grounded approach shaped by personal values and closely aligned with symbolic values in the host society. These choices can be seen as strategic acts, dynamic efforts to enhance personal value within intersecting symbolic systems.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the adaptation of six migrant language teachers in Japan, showing that their strategies and educational ideologies were shaped by cognitive orientations internalised through habitus within specific social contexts. Integration, often viewed as the most successful form of adaptation, gains legitimacy where individuality is symbolically valued. Yet such value systems are not universal and may be reinterpreted depending on context. While integration may be effective for some, assimilation, when self-directed and contextually appropriate, can also be a valid strategy.

In practice, promoting integration as a universal goal risks marginalising harmony-oriented approaches, as adaptation preferences often reflect implicit dispositions shaped by sociocultural contexts. In education, this calls for particular attention from English language educators. Advocacy for English often draws on analytical thinking and foregrounds separability and distinction over holistic perspectives. Without reflection, educators may inadvertently reproduce this orientation as normative. Equitable education requires recognising diverse cognitive and cultural orientations and questioning dominant frameworks. Engaging with alternative worldviews not only broadens pedagogy but also cultivates what Kramsch (2006, 2020) terms symbolic competence, the ability to navigate, reinterpret, and reposition oneself within symbolic systems. Fostering this competence is key to inclusive, reflective language education. While this study offers valuable insight, its small, occupation-specific sample limits generalisability. Future research across broader contexts and populations is essential to enrich our understanding of the symbolic dimensions of adaptation.

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