This book makes an important contribution to research on English language teaching through a series of studies that focus on the experiences of Japanese teachers of English in Japanese universities. It offers insights into the place of English in the Japanese higher education system, and the ways in which Japanese teachers of English negotiate their professional identities within that system. By exploring the professional lives of EFL educators in Japanese universities, the book makes a useful contribution to our understanding of English language teaching as a global profession that employs both native speaker and non-native-speaker teachers of English. Comprising eight chapters, the first four chapters establish the background to the study, and the following three chapters present empirical data from three separate studies. The final, concluding chapter draws the findings together, and discusses the pedagogical implications of the studies.

The opening chapter sets out a founding dilemma: despite ongoing reforms to the teaching of English in Japan, relatively little attention has been paid to English education at the tertiary level, or to the teachers who work in that sector. In outlining the motivation for her study, Nagatomo points to a set of questions that are relevant to readers well beyond the context of Japan. In particular, Nagatomo is curious about how teachers with diverse qualifications and experience come to terms with teaching English language skills; and how teachers respond to students from diverse backgrounds who may have little interest in learning English. The remainder of the chapter provides an outline of the book.

The second chapter situates the research within the sociocultural and historical context of English language education in Japan. Nagatomo describes the shifting patterns of English language education in Japan, and explores contemporary debates about “the lack of success among Japanese in mastering English” (p.15). A comprehensive description of Japan’s stratified education system provides a useful background for understanding the links between education, socioeconomic privilege, and access to high-status careers. This chapter also outlines the significance of gender in that, although women are now well represented amongst the student population in higher education, they are less likely to be seen in equal numbers in the upper echelon of professional careers, including in the academy. Turning to the relationship between English language education and gender, Nagatomo discusses the “feminized status” of English (p.32), and briefly outlines the various ways in which female
learners are targeted in language industry marketing strategies. The final section in this chapter reviews statistical data and ethnographic accounts that demonstrate the marginalised position of female professors in Japanese universities, where they are underrepresented in all areas of academic specialization.

Chapter three reviews the literature on language teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and professional identity, and discusses the positioning of native-speaker and non-native speaker English teachers in higher education. Using key studies, Nagatomo refers to the struggles faced by non-native speaker teachers of English, particularly when adopting ‘Western’ teaching methods that may not be entirely appropriate for the context in which they teach. Focusing more closely on the Japanese context, particular attention is paid to studies that examine English language teaching in tertiary education, and the different roles assigned to foreign and Japanese teachers. Ironically, these studies demonstrate that although native-speaker English language teachers are generally said to enjoy higher professional status than non-native-speaker teachers, in some EFL contexts, including Japan, “expat teachers are often relegated to marginal positions” (p.65).

The next chapter introduces the data-collection process adopted for the studies discussed in subsequent chapters of the book. A rationale is provided for a narrative research method as a means of analysing teachers’ accounts of personal and professional experience. The chapter then describes the research participants, the processes of interviewing, classroom observation, and data analysis. As is now common in ethnographic studies, the author and researcher also makes a point of explicating her own position in relation to the research context. In this regard, Nagatomo sketches a trajectory from ‘backpacker’ teacher to professional university educator, thus describing a career path that may reverberate with the experience of many English teachers. From her current position in a Japanese university, Nagatomo offers an insider perspective on the university system; but this is balanced by her outsider positioning as a non-Japanese and a native-English-speaker.

The following three chapters present the author’s own empirical studies. Chapter five focuses on four Japanese early career teachers of English, and examines the ways in which they engage with teaching practice, with conditions of employment in the university, and with the wider social context in which their professional activities are situated. The analysis in this chapter draws on Wenger’s (1998) theory of identity, and demonstrates that through these various engagements and interactions, the new teachers construct their professional identities and find their place in the university as a community of practice.

Chapter six investigates the intersection of gender and other dimensions of identity in the accounts of seven female teachers from different age groups. These accounts are analysed through a four-fold framework of identity adopted from Gee (2000). Nagatomo’s analysis indicates that gender permeates every aspect of the teachers’ professional identities: from
their initial access to English study, to their difficult positioning as working women, and their struggle for acceptance within a male-dominated workplace.

The final study, presented in chapter seven, is a case study based on interviews and classroom observations. This study provides interesting insights into the way one teacher’s beliefs shape her sense of professional identity and her English language teaching practices. In particular, this chapter returns to the question of how teachers with an academic background in a discipline other than language teaching may come to terms with an English language teaching career.

The book’s conclusion, in chapter eight, draws together the findings from the preceding studies, and summarises the various factors that contribute to the development of teachers’ professional identity. In closing, the chapter suggests pedagogical implications that could be taken up in further research and in changes to education policy. The first is for improved pre-service pedagogical training, to better prepare prospective teachers for the demands of English language teaching in Japan. Since, in Nagatomo’s study, many of the teachers had qualifications in English literature or linguistics, it was felt that a more thorough grounding in theoretical and practical approaches to language teaching pedagogy would be of great benefit. Second, for students preparing to enter the profession, Nagatomo suggests that an apprenticeship model led by an expert teaching professor would offer opportunities for practical guidance, enhance new teachers’ confidence in the classroom, and serve as a solid foundation for a successful and satisfying career.

The book’s complex and detailed analysis of teacher identity, though small in scope, provides an important counter to a range of negative discourses that have circulated about English language teaching in Japan. Although the author warns that the studies’ findings are applicable only for the Japanese tertiary context, and may not be generalisable to all universities in Japan, many of the challenges faced by these teachers will resonate with English language educators in other locations. These challenges relate to the way teachers from diverse educational backgrounds and life experiences develop a professional identity in English language teaching; the way teachers engage with students who may demonstrate little interest in English language study; and the way gender categorisation shapes language teachers’ professional careers. By exploring these issues, the book has much to offer teachers, teacher educators, and researchers interested in English language teaching as an aspect of university education.

REFERENCES
