

MEXT Policies on EFL Education: Challenges in Linking Ideology and Policy Statements

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Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the revised English version of the policy document entitled "Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (MEXT 2011). Writers including Hashimoto (2007, 2009), Liddicoat (2007), McVeigh (2002), Reesor (2002) and Nishino & Watanabe (2008) argue that this policy document promotes two contradictory sets of objectives: fostering learners' communicative skills and limiting the impact of English on the Japanese language and culture. According to these analysts, this approach to policy design emerges from the ideological discourse of *nihonjinron*, and serves the Government's objectives of protecting the integrity of Japan's national identity. In attempting to provide a contrasting perspective, I aim to a) highlight the epistemological and methodological shortcomings of the '*nihonjinron* critiques', and b) suggest how a realist approach to CDA research can overcome the challenges involved in drawing links between policy texts, broader forms of discourse, and educational practice.

1. Introduction

This is a study of the revised English version of the document entitled "Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (MEXT 2003, 2011). My focus is on Section 9, which guides junior high school EFL education.

While some analysts agree that the MEXT plan constitutes a positive step towards solving fundamental problems in Japanese EFL education (Goto-Butler & Iino 2005, Tanabe 2004), the dominant consensus in the research literature suggests that the 2003 plan is worded in a contradictory fashion (Hashimoto 2007, 2009, Liddicoat 2007, McVeigh 2002, Reesor 2002). The principal argument is that the plan aims to

- a) promote learners' communicative skills through the improvement of language teaching methodologies and through a focus on learner's self-expression and critical thinking skills
- b) limit the impact of English on the local language and culture by positioning English – as a unified and fixed entity – in diametrical opposition to Japanese.

Many critics of the MEXT plan suggest that this particular approach to policy design emerges from *nihonjinron*, an ideological discourse on the perceived 'unique uniqueness' of Japanese language, culture and society (Befu 1992, 2001, Yoshino 1992). In addition, these analysts hold that the current policies are formulated so as to serve the Government's objectives of protecting the integrity of Japan's national identity in the face of perceived Western cultural pressures embodied by English education.

In this paper, I provide a critical perspective towards these claims by addressing a central methodological problem involving the application of CDA methodology. I also highlight a central epistemological problem emerging from a surface analysis of text. To demonstrate my point, I replicate the way in which the *nihonjinron* critics tend to conduct CDA

research, thereby attempting to reveal contrasting evidence (i.e. policy statements which are not characteristic of *nihonjinron*). While the scope of this paper does not allow for both a criticism of the '*nihonjinron* critiques' and a complete formulation of a viable research alternative, my intention is to highlight the need for conducting CDA research through a realist perspective (Archer 1996, 2004, Bhaskar 1998, Maxwell 2012, Sayer 2000, Sealey & Carter 2004).

2. The MEXT plan

2.1 General outline of the plan

Tanabe (2004) – the ex-president of the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) Association – locates the origins of the 2003 MEXT plan in 1977, when the concept of *yutori kyouiku* – roughly translated as "allowing learners to grow by removing pressure" – was introduced. More concrete steps towards the improvement of EFL education in Japan came in 2000, when the "Report of the National Commission on Education Reform" was published. After its establishment in January 2001, MEXT published the "Seven Priority Strategies, or the Rainbow Plan for the 21st century", which laid out general guidelines for English education. The document entitled "Developing a Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" was published in 2002, and became the blueprint for the 2003 plan. It expanded on some of the previous proposals in greater detail, and reaffirmed the educational philosophy of *yutori kyouiku*.

According to Section 9, the development of communicative skills in English (through a four-skill approach) and critical thinking skills are fundamental to EFL education in junior high schools. More specifically, the development of comprehension skills is said to occur through greater understanding of writer/speaker's intentions. In parallel, the development of production skills is said to occur through learners

expressing their own thoughts using both spoken and written English. In order for students to express their own thoughts and feelings, the document states that they must first demonstrate the ability to convey factual information or make judgments.

Notions such as *appropriate target language use, sharing personal thoughts and feelings, making judgments* and *positive attitude toward communication* pervade throughout the document. While these notions are left relatively undefined, the document recommends appropriate activities in each of the four skills that can be implemented in junior high school EFL classrooms. These activities are divided into *language-use situations* and *language functions*. The development of each skill is defined in a progressive fashion, from language form to language function. The total amount of words, collocations and common expressions to be learned by the end of junior high school is set at 1,200. The document then lists and defines the kinds of sentence structures to be taught. Raising learners' 'awareness of the differences between English and Japanese' is proposed as the principal means to teach target language grammar. In terms of the use of classroom materials, the document suggests teachers to:

- a) enhance learners' understanding of various ways of viewing and thinking, along with their ability to make impartial judgments and cultivate a rich sensibility;
- b) help learners' understanding of both Japanese and foreign cultures
- c) raise learners' interest in language and culture and in developing respectful attitudes toward these; and
- d) deepen learners' international understanding from a broad perspective by heightening their awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation.

2.2 School administrators and teachers' reception of the plan

While changes in EFL policies were widely anticipated prior to the plan's publication, many junior and senior high school educators saw the 2003 plan as an unnecessary and impractical addition to the existing curriculum (O'Donnell 2005). In addition, some analysts, including Tanabe (2004: 3), underline the plan's confusing emphasis on both English and Japanese within EFL education. Hato (2005: 43) is more critical. He suggests that the impracticality of the plan generated cynicism among teachers because of what they saw as the Government's general disregard for the reality 'on the ground'. In short, many analysts report a negative reception of the 2003 plan.

2.3 Impact of the plan on EFL classroom practice

A survey conducted by MEXT (MEXT 2012) demonstrates that the goals set by the 2003 plan have met with very modest results. Furthermore, many analysts agree that implementation of the plan has been slow to come, suggesting that government proposals are not always implemented in schools in a straightforward fashion. O'Donnell (2005) identifies three reasons: a) intrusion of non-teaching duties into teachers' curricular responsibilities, b) institutional restrictions in the workplace, and c) the complex ways reforms are interpreted and implemented in schools. As a result, the author concludes that "current reform measures appear to be implemented unevenly within the educational system" (p.300). In short, the consensus seems to be that there may be a problem at the level of implementation rather than at the level of policy design.

3. Criticisms of the plan

3.1 General criticisms

Tanabe (2004) assesses the 2003 plan in a mostly positive light. He argues that the plan contains clear financial specifications and practical descriptions for implementation. Goto-Butler & Iino (2005: 25) parallel

this view by arguing that the plan gives greater autonomy to teachers and local governments. However, recent studies (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, Hugues 2005, Kobayashi 2007, Komatsu 2002, Kubota 2011, Nishino & Watanabe 2008, Reesor 2002, Sakui 2004, Yoshida 2003) argue that there is a considerable gap between government policies on EFL education and schools' capacity to implement them. Of course, this capacity is not an essential characteristic of the schools, but depends on a variety of other factors including the quality of teacher training programs in universities, teachers' L2 abilities, not to mention socio-economic factors (see Kanno (2008) for further discussion on the socio-economic impacts on EFL education). Consequently, recent studies highlighting the gap between policy and practice remain largely incomplete without direct evidence from educators and school administrators. So far, few have included such evidence. Below, I divide the criticisms of the 2003 plan into practical concerns and ideological concerns.

3.2 The MEXT plan as unrealistic and impractical

Hato (2005) provides some explanation for the modest results published by the Ministry (MEXT 2012) by claiming that, since the plan does not provide “context-based criteria for evaluating the feasibility of those goals objectively” (Hato 2005: 39), it is not grounded in empirical research, and is thus unrealistic. Furthermore, the author holds that the new Course of Study fails to rectify the ongoing overemphasis on exam-oriented language teaching, and fails to integrate the perspective of EFL teachers.

A focus of Hato's criticism of the plan is the Ministry's reliance on the STEP Test (designed by a foundation unrelated to MEXT) as central measure for both learners' L2 proficiency and the effectiveness of the Japanese public school EFL system. This, he argues, has forced a situation in which Japanese EFL students and teachers now see success on L2 proficiency exams as the core objective of EFL education. More

importantly, Hato points out the plan's failure to allocate sufficient classroom time for teachers and students to meet the Government's proposed objectives. In sum, the apparent gap between policy design and classroom practice appears to affect the efficacy of these new EFL policies.

3.3 The MEXT plan as ideological

In line with Hato's criticisms, most analysts agree that Japanese EFL practices remain focused on language teaching as exam preparation (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, Nishino & Watanabe 2008, Sakui 2004, Seargeant 2009, Yoshida 2003). According to Fujimoto-Adamson (2006) and Nishino & Watanabe (2008), this contradictory approach to English education in Japan – i.e., English for communication versus English for examination – is one of the Japanese EFL system's most enduring characteristics. Authors such as Hashimoto (2007, 2009), Kubota (1999, 2002), Liddicoat (2007), McVeigh (2002), and Reesor (2002) go further by suggesting that the way in which the Government 'frames' English in policy statements is a manifestation of the *nihonjinron* discourse.

Providing some historical background, Sato (2004) observes that the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of two contradictory forms of discourse in Japanese educational policies: the *nihonjinron* discourse which promoted the inculcation of nationalistic values in schools, and the *ibunkakan kyouiku* (intercultural education) discourse which aimed at sensitizing Japanese students to foreign cultures. She adds that this created an irreconcilable tension, which resulted in the intercultural education discourse being used in reality as a tool for promoting the nationalist *nihonjinron* discourse.

Sato believes that the Government's approach to EFL education is rooted in the assumption that teaching English for communicative purposes leads to the westernization of Japanese culture and society, while a strong emphasis on language testing serves to distance the target culture from the local culture. This belief is echoed by Hashimoto (2007):

“[t]he efforts to make Japanese learners of English maintain their Japanese identity has shaped the way TEFL is structured in education” (p.28). In Hashimoto (2009: 23), the author argues that “government policies for promoting TEFL in Japan have been politically inspired. They tend to focus less on the educational needs of individual learners, and more on how TEFL contributes to the nation's economic success and to the formation and maintenance of national identity in an era of globalization.” If we accept Sato (2004) and Hashimoto’s (2007) views, we are led to conclude that Japanese EFL educators are forced to follow two contradictory sets of educational objectives because of ideological contradictions at the level of policy design. Again, without direct input from educators themselves, this remains merely an assumption.

Liddicoat (2007) also argues that the gap between government policies and educational practices is the product of *nihonjinron*. Like Hashimoto (2007, 2009), Liddicoat attempts to support his claims by conducting CDA research into Japanese EFL policies. He argues that nationalist ideologies and essentialized concepts of Japanese identity directly affect the framing of the discourse on intercultural understanding, and that this process is developed discursively in government’s language policies.

McVeigh (2002) goes even further by arguing that the Government’s ‘*nihonjinron* tainted’ approach to EFL education is an application of Japan's practice of actively ‘molding’ the Japanese population into tools of capitalist greed through institutionalized ideological pressure. In other words, educational policies embody ideological positions which institutional powers force upon the local population. Reesor’s (2002) analysis is parallel to McVeigh’s. The author argues that, in their desire to protect the integrity of Japanese national identity, some MEXT policy makers intentionally complicate the

implementation of policies aimed at facilitating Japanese EFL learners' development of L2 communicative abilities.

McVeigh and Reesor's highly critical views are counterbalanced by those of other more moderate *nihonjinron* critics, notably Seargeant (2008, 2009) and McKenzie (2010). Seargeant (2009) does not necessarily see the ideological framing of English in Japan as the will of a powerful national structure imposed on its human subjects through language policies, with the aim of serving capitalist needs. For him, this ideological approach to English instead originates from more localized structural processes that are mostly concerned with how people interpret the presence of English in their surroundings.

4. The study

For this study, I have selected relevant segments from Section 9 of the latest version of the 2003 plan (MEXT 2011). My criterion for relevancy is based on how the selected statements relate to the issues raised by the *nihonjinron* critics discussed above.

4.1 Replicating the CDA approach used by the *nihonjinron* critics

According to Fairclough (2010), CDA is a methodological tool which can provide critical insight into social realities and a basis for detecting the possible ideological nature of specific types of discourse. Central to such project is a clarification of the researcher's stance towards the object of research. Moreover, since CDA involves drawing connections between discursive practices at the local level and larger social realities, the task of labeling discourse is central. This task must first be defined from both theoretical and methodological perspectives.

4.2 Research stance

I structure this paper from the understanding that "no research methodology is autonomous but instead must be viewed as an ideological stance both toward what is being studied and toward how the research

will be used” (Bloome et al. 2005: xix). As for my own research stance, I believe that the relationship between ideology and social practice – if there is one – cannot be defined as one of straightforward causality. I even question whether it is possible to find any definite way of determining, from an empirical perspective, whether *nihonjinron* has a direct and debilitating impact on EFL practices in Japan.

In addition, I believe that, while ideologies may form a part of the cultural pre-dispositions provided by *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991), they may not necessarily be accepted and reproduced by everyone. In fact, ideologies are often the source of tensions and clashes between groups, and often denote a social struggle for legitimacy and access to power (Fairclough 1989, Thompson 2007). More significantly, I consider Bloome et al.’s (2005) argument that

[p]eople [...] are not dependent variables: they create and recreate the worlds in which they live; purposefully struggle with each other over meaning, action, material, and social relationships; resist the imposition of unwanted control; and fashion alternative ways of living their lives that eschew given structures and strictures. They retain the potential of agency even in situations in which agency is unlikely or typically absent (p.4).

This stance comes in direct contrast to the *nihonjinron* critiques such as those advanced by Befu (2001), who argues that *nihonjinron* is a) a hegemonic entity uncritically accepted by at least half the Japanese population, b) a national pastime in Japan, and c) Japan’s civil religion.

4.3 Dominant themes in the 2003 plan

By combining my own analysis of the 2003 plan (with specific reference to Section 9), Tanabe’s (2004) analysis, and data from other Government documents, I have discerned seven dominant themes:

- 1) language testing

- 2) teacher training and evaluation
- 3) models for target language competence
- 4) opportunities to learn the L2 outside the classroom
- 5) mastery of the L1 as prerequisite for L2 competence
- 6) the globalization of Japanese society
- 7) Japanese identity and the internationalization of Japan

4.3.1 Language testing as guiding force behind EFL education

The discourse on language testing tends to dominate throughout the document. It also includes the most concrete set of objectives. However, the principal assessment strategy in the EFL classroom appears to be devoted to external proficiency tests (STEP, TOEFL and TOEIC) and high school and university entrance tests.

Kubota (2011) argues that this approach follows tenets of linguistic instrumentalism, which refers to the practice of learning English for utilitarian purposes such as work and economic success. She adds that this approach has allowed the testing industry to practically guide English language teaching in Japan. The results from her study reveal that repeated institutional language testing leads to the assumption among learners and educators that successful language learning and success on external proficiency tests are synonymous. This further binds learners' efforts to the belief that knowledge of the global economy and active participation in it can be achieved through mastery of English which, again, is measured by success on external English proficiency tests.

While there is some evidence that show the MEXT plan's tendency towards linguistic instrumentalism, it also emphasizes the development of learners' L2 communicative competence through self-expression and critical thinking. Here, it is important to mention that recent TOEIC, TOEFL and STEP revisions are, to some extent, aiming at assessing learners' L2 productive skills. But the main argument being advanced

here does not pertain to the improving quality of such tests but rather to the notion proposed by Kubota that repeated institutional language testing can lead to the somewhat counterproductive assumption that L2 development is synonymous with development of learners' L2 testing skills. This assumption can be damaging to the Japanese EFL system because if educators see test preparation as their main educational duty, learners might equate language learning with language testing, as opposed to language learning for communicative purposes. This point is magnified even further when we consider that all the proficiency tests being discussed in the plan – being highly standardized tests – are not essentially designed to respond to local contexts and needs.

4.3.2 Teacher training and evaluation

The plan specifies ambitious English proficiency requirements from Japanese English teachers, which are also based on the STEP, TOEFL and TOEIC tests. However, nothing is said about actual teaching competence. Instead, potential teachers are to have sufficient abilities to 'conduct classes to cultivate communication abilities through the repetition of activities making using of English'. The mere mention of terms such as 'communication abilities' and 'the using of English' appears to suffice. In making vague statements, the authors of the plan overlook what is potentially the most important requirement for language teachers: knowledge of SLA research. In short, the plan assumes that anyone with sufficient abilities in the target language can teach it.

While the plan promotes what it calls 'intensive teacher training', it fails to specify the kind of training targeted (i.e. training in applied linguistics). Also, in mentioning the possibility for selected teachers to undergo training overseas, policy makers assume that a) EFL teachers must learn how to teach the language outside Japan, and b) mere exposure to the target culture is sufficient for such training. While I am not entirely convinced that this particular perspective reflects *nihonjinron*, I believe

that it demonstrates a lack of understanding of language teaching and learning processes, as defined by SLA research.

4.3.3 Models for target language competence

In order to provide learners with reliable models of target language use, the plan emphasizes the hiring of native speakers of English, mainly from the inner circle of World Englishes (Kachru 1992a) to work as ALTs at the junior high school level. This plan is an extension of previous policies from the 1980s which led in part to the JET Programme.

However, the 2003 plan departs from earlier plans by promoting foreign English teachers ‘with advanced abilities’ as full time teachers, with the same responsibilities and benefits as full time Japanese teachers. Moreover, the plan promotes the use of fluent Japanese English speakers living in local communities as models for L2 use. Even if many concepts in the 2003 plan are vague, the data found in the MEXT document does not corroborate two of the central *nihonjinron* arguments criticized by the *nihonjinron* critics – native speakers of English as only valid models of L2 use and western culture as threat to Japanese society.

4.3.4 Opportunities to learn the L2 outside the classroom

The document states that over ten thousand high school students are to study abroad every year. Again, the Japanese context is seen as essentially devoid of opportunities for learners to use the L2 in real-life situations. Learning English outside the classroom is therefore equated with learning it outside Japan. It is possible to suggest that policy makers position Japan and the rest of the world as opposed entities. However, for an EFL country like Japan to foster (albeit some) students’ competence in the L2 through direct exposure with the target language and culture, this plan appears like an effective strategy.

However, the recent emergence of e-learning programs has significantly increased the chances for autonomous learning since CLT approaches to language learning were introduced a few decades ago. Thus, it is crucial to conceive language learning as a process which can easily go beyond the classroom context. Unfortunately, the authors of the 2003 plan fail to address this notion.

Consequently, I do not believe that this plan is necessarily the product of *nihonjinron*. Instead, the problem is more about policy makers' apparent lack of understanding of the potential for more active and independent language learning offered by e-learning programs. Still, Japanese policy makers also appear to have a limited understanding of the notion of English as a *lingua franca* (Kachru 1992b). Such understanding would allow learners and educators to move beyond the widely accepted division between inner, outer and expanding circles of World Englishes, and position English as a 'legitimate' second language for Japanese people, as opposed to the language of the 'Other'.

4.3.5 L1 mastery as prerequisite for L2 communicative competence

The MEXT website states that “[t]he new Courses of Study increase class hours in [...] foreign languages with an emphasis on balancing the attainment of knowledge and skill with thinking capacity, decisiveness, and expressiveness.” In other words, EFL education is combined with the promotion of critical thinking skills and self-expression. In sharp contrast, however, the plan suggests that the development of self-expression and critical thinking skills is possible only when learners have mastered their L1. Tsui & Tollefson (2007) highlight this contradiction in the Ministry's approach to foreign language education as such: “[i]n a MEXT policy document in November 2004 titled “Born again Japan!” [...] [i]t has been argued that in order to learn English well, students must improve their Japanese language and develop a sense of

Japanese '*self*', which requires full enculturation in Japanese society' (p.10). This assumption contradicts most SLA research on bilingualism, and appears to reflect *nihonjinron*.

4.3.6 English and the globalization of Japanese society

Section 9 equates foreign language education with English education. It also promotes the idea that intercultural understanding and knowledge of a globalized world can only develop through increased mastery of English. In crafting such statements, the authors of the document position English as a politically neutral entity.

Contrasting significantly with this vision, Okanao & Tsuchiya (1999) retrace the history of EFL in Japan, arguing that a primary goal for English education during the Meiji period was to disseminate nationalism in reaction to increasing pressure from the West. Since then, Nishino & Watanabe (2008) argue that Japan's approach to English has been marked by booms, or periods of intense popularity of English, and backlashes, or periods of struggle against perceived Western imperialism. Seargeant (2008, 2009) holds that the presence of English in Japan has led to a specific type of discourse of English, with Hashimoto (2007) pointing out that this discourse has led to a form of deconstruction of English as a form of resistance to the perceived hegemonic influence of western nations in Japan. These views suggest that both globalization and English education are not uncritically accepted realities in Japan.

I agree with these interpretations on the basis that the history of Japanese resistance against Western influences makes it potentially difficult for Japanese EFL learners nowadays to divorce the task of learning English from larger questions concerning their identity as Japanese nationals. However, two counterarguments need to be made here. First, the reality of the English world nowadays – e.g. more than three quarters of the English speaking world being populated by non-native speakers of the language; the emergence of local varieties of

English throughout the world – makes it increasingly hard to argue that English is a colonial force from the West (Pennycook 1998). Sower (1999) points out that the global reality of the 21st Century contrasts significantly from the era of colonization which marked previous centuries. Second, while history may indicate a tendency in Japan towards resisting Western influences, it is difficult to make definite claims about Japan's approach to the West simply because ongoing changes in the Japanese political zeitgeist cloud the possibility for the emergence of a fixed and unified 'Japanese governmental perspective' towards the protection of a Japanese national identity.

Thus, I reiterate my argument that the contradictions in the 2003 plan are likely to be the result of policy makers' limited understanding of SLA theory, of English as a *lingua franca*, and of recent developments in the field of language learning. Seargeant (2008: 138) argues similarly: "[t]he distinction between 'foreign' and 'international' – of such importance in much of contemporary applied linguistics – would seem [...] not to have entered the consciousness of policy in Japan [...] it also reflects a confusion in the approach taken to the language."

4.3.7 Japanese identity and the internationalization of Japan

In 2000, the Japanese Government published a document entitled "The Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's goals in the 21st Century" (PMC 2000). This document states that, for Japanese people to protect their language and culture, they need to 'actively absorb foreign languages and other cultures, enrich Japanese culture through contact with them, and at the same time show the glory of Japanese culture in an international language.' This view still forms an integral part of the 2003 plan. It suggests that, while knowledge of English serves to foster intercultural understanding, it also serves to protect Japanese identity. Through greater knowledge of foreign cultures, learners are assumed to be able to find effective ways to promote Japanese culture to the world.

In this picture, the promotion of Japanese culture becomes the ultimate goal of EFL education. In fact, the 2003 plan does state that one of its central objectives in fostering ‘Japanese with English abilities’ is to promote Japanese identity in such a way as to make it more accessible to outsiders. In short, this lends some support to the *nihonjinron* critiques.

However, the perspective advocated by the *nihonjinron* critics seems to hold that a *nihonjinron*-free approach to EFL education would be free of this supposed contradiction between intercultural knowledge and appreciation for Japanese culture. Again, this stance is problematic because it projects the notion of English as neutral entity.

4.4 Summary

In the analysis above, I have tried to demonstrate that replicating the approach to CDA research used by most *nihonjinron* critics can lead to contrasting interpretations. At times, I have contradicted some of the *nihonjinron* critiques, and at other time their views appeared to have some degree of validity.

To me, what is more relevant to the discussion is the unfeasibility of the plan, rather than its presumed ideological basis. Like Hato, I believe that the MEXT plan is essentially idealistic, and ultimately fails to meet the requirements of a sound policy document on EFL education because a) it contains many vague and often contradictory statements, b) it offers little in terms of guidance for implementation, and c) it does not successfully integrate current SLA research. Also, I agree with Hashimoto (2009) and the view that the authors of the 2003 plan show a tendency to use popular key words unreflectively. I therefore suggest that, in designing the 2003 plan, policy makers adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to EFL policy design more than an ideological discourse on Japaneseness.

5. Methodological issues

My disagreement with the *nihonjinron* critiques emerges from both epistemological and methodological concerns. The task of labeling particular forms of discourse (i.e. policy statements) as belonging to larger and more abstract forms of discourse (i.e. *nihonjinron*, *ibunkakan kyouiku*) entails significant empirical challenges. This is largely because discourse is not an entity with clearly defined boundaries (Gee 1999: 29-30). Also, not everything about discourse can be revealed from a surface analysis of text. More specifically, the problem comes from how the *nihonjinron* critics conceptualize discourse, ideology, and social practice.

The Marxist notion of *false consciousness*, as highlighted by both Lukács (1971) and Freire (1972), defines ideological discourse as part of a structure of oppression applied by hegemonic power. This structure is solidified and intensified by keeping the oppressed from gaining an awareness of their oppression. Since hegemonic power can be challenged by a well-informed population, the goal for hegemonic power is to impede this population's access to the knowledge of that oppression. This can be achieved by first creating a system of delusion which appears as nonthreatening (i.e. which appears to be serving the perceived needs of the population), and second to convince the population that this system is the only 'true' structure. In short, false consciousness facilitates social control through a form of pacification of the population, so that the latter remains docile and conforms to the will of those in control. If the *nihonjinron* ideology is defined as such, we must then understand Japanese people as entities controlled by an invisible and ubiquitous ideological force.

This, I believe, is a problematic position to adopt because, in the analysis of complex social processes, human agency is entirely at the mercy of structure. In other words, what people think or do is assumed to be the product of institutional structures rather than the product of

decisions made by individuals. The problem is that this theory fails to account for agentive processes which unfold independently from structure. Despite this, *nihonjinron* is often conceptualized in the existing literature as a form of false consciousness. As a result, I believe that it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the *nihonjinron* critiques are based on actual facts or whether they are metaphorical statements formulated for the purpose of establishing a particular epistemological narrative towards Japanese culture and society. One noticeable indication of this is that the perspectives of Japanese EFL educators and learners are largely absent.

6. Possible solutions

While I do not categorically reject Tollefson & Tsui's (2007: 262) argument that “language policies are always linked with broader social, economic, and political agendas that usually have priority over pedagogical and educational concerns”, I suggest that the nature of this link needs to be defined theoretically and methodologically. Doing so, I believe, can facilitate an empirical research program devoted to ascertaining the nature of such link.

Designing a richer and more comprehensive research project aimed at linking broader and more abstract realities with the reality on the ground goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth pointing out that a realist application of CDA (Fairclough 1989, 2010, Wodak 1996) is particularly well suited for such an endeavour.

Fairclough (2010) provides important clarifications on CDA's capacity to study the relation between texts, discourse and broader social practices. The author begins with a definition of discourse, which he sees as a relational entity. From this, he states that “we cannot answer the question 'what is discourse' except in terms of both its 'internal' relations and its 'external' relations with other 'objects'. Put differently, discourse is not simply an entity we can define independently: we can only arrive at

an understanding of it by analysing sets of relations” (*ibid.* 3). To analyze discourse in relation to other objects, we must first clarify their distinctive features. Fairclough’s approach to uncovering the distinct and emergent properties of both discourse and objects constitutes a central tenet of the realist perspective towards ontology.

A realist approach to social research favours the adoption of a variety of viewpoints, or as Fairclough calls it, a transdisciplinary approach to analysis. This is in direct line with Larsen-Freeman & Cameron’s (2008) complexity approach to social research as well as Sealey & Carter’s (2004) social realist approach. In order to avoid making the assumption that both ideology and practice are locked in a unidirectional and causal relationship, the study of the links between ideology and social practice should correlate the results amassed from various epistemological perspectives. That way, the research program can better reflect the complexity of the social processes under focus. Fairclough’s CDA approach follows the same lines: “[w]e cannot transform the world in any old way we happen to construe it; the world is such that some transformations are possible and others are not. So CDA is a ‘moderate’ or ‘contingent’ form of social constructivism” (Fairclough 2010: 5). In terms of combining various epistemologies, Fairclough’s notion of *translatability* of concepts, categories and relations from different theories and disciplines becomes useful. In short, converging points between various frameworks become important loci for analysis. Conversely, when different epistemological disciplines provide diverging interpretations of the same phenomenon, relationships must be further problematized instead of simplified for the sake of a particular argument. But perhaps more relevant to the current discussion is Fairclough’s (1992: 88) argument that

“[w]hile it is true that the forms and content of texts do bear the imprint of (are traces of) ideological processes

and structures, it is not possible to ‘read off’ ideologies from texts [...] this is because meanings are produced through interpretations of texts, and texts are open to diverse interpretations which may differ in their ideological import”

On a different front, I suggest that the study of the relationship between *nihonjinron* and educational policies and practices should focus on the effect(s) of ideology on practice. This is possible by first analyzing how text is bound to discourse practice, and then how discourse practice are bound to social practice, or again, to particular representations of the social world. In short, the study of ideology becomes a sort of study of sociocultural change (Fairclough 2010). Seargeant (2008) also emphasizes the need for research to focus on both policy design and pedagogical practices:

“through an analysis of how the English language is conceptualised in pedagogic and policy documents in and relating to Japan we are able to gain an initial reading of the way in which the language operates as a determining cultural force within Japanese society. Insights from this [provide] an important first step in the analysis of how educational policy transfers into curriculum and classroom practice, and why it is that ELT in Japan exists in the state that it does” (p.122).

I believe that a realist approach to the study of ideology in relation to educational practice can potentially reveal links between abstract notions and empirical evidence. Such research project should begin with a theoretical ‘unpacking’ of notions such as institutional structures, ideological discourse, language policies, and educational practices at both the local level and institutional levels. It would also involve

- a) analyzing various empirical data (written and spoken texts produced by both institutions and people), as opposed to analyzing one single source of data
- b) correlating data analysis from a) with people's interpretations of such data
- c) resisting the temptation to conduct analysis so that a particular epistemological narrative is reinforced, which means including contrastive interpretations as meaningful to the final analysis.

In the end, the researcher studying the relationship between ideology and educational practice should remain critical of the tendency to draw direct causal links between these two complex entities.

7. Conclusions

Considering that a fuller and richer empirical account of the relationship between institutional structures and localized pedagogical practices has yet to be provided in the current body of research on the Japanese EFL context, I propose that future research should a) prioritize local practices, and b) refrain from drawing direct links between these practices and ideological discourse or other abstract realities.

In closing, I bring attention to Stewart & Miyahara's (2011) argument that "[some *nihonjinron* critics] have pointed to an element of *nihonjinron* or nationalist ideology in language teaching policy and practice. However, another explanation is that the persistence of a strongly teacher-led, translation-focused approach to language teaching is simply a form of conservatism" (p.62). Ultimately, genuine changes in current EFL practices in Japan are unlikely to occur unless more fundamental issues with teaching methodology, student evaluation and student motivation are addressed more explicitly (Hugues 2005: 354). Certainly, this type of empirical focus can help direct attention away from

abstract and perhaps less productive discussions on ideology, towards a realist view on how teachers deal with MEXT's problematic objectives.

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