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Abstract

Contemporary analyses of Japanese EFL education indicate strong evidence that the dominant approaches to EFL education in Japan do not lead learners to become successful target language users.   Many analysts believe that this is largely because innovations at the institutional and local levels have been both limited and problematic.   This has led to a growing interest in research focusing on issues of identity, ideology, discourse and power in foreign language education.   Some analysts suggest that EFL education in Japan is ideologically-driven towards the mitigation of a perceived threat from English and western cultures.   In this paper, I address this line of inquiry from theoretical and methodological standpoints.   I argue that any empirical research project devoted to the study of ideology in relation to Japanese educational practices must be rooted in a thorough conceptualization of the interrelationship between ideological discourse and social practice.   To achieve this task, I propose the adoption of a stratified view of the Japanese EFL system in line with a social realist approach to applied linguistic research.

Introduction

The Japanese EFL system constitutes one of the most academically scrutinized contexts in the world, namely because there is convincing evidence that institutions of education across the country are failing to help Japanese EFL learners become successful target language users.   Seargeant (2008) points out that the literature focusing on the Japanese EFL context has, since the late 1970s, been ceaselessly arguing that the system overemphasizes reading comprehension and grammar translation, while largely ignoring listening and speaking skills and CLT.   He qualifies such critiques as "a constant refrain" (p.126).

Despite years of EFL education, few Japanese learners come to master the L2 for

communicative purposes. Sullivan & Schatz (2009) state that, even if Japan spends enormous sums of money every year to improve English education, it continues to rank among the lowest scoring Asian countries on the TOEFL Test, a fact which Rivers (2011) also underlines. While results from such tests do not directly correlate with learners' actual communicative competence (Chapman, 2003), these tests, being "exercise[s] in orthodox grammatical knowledge" (Seargeant 2009: 52), measure test-takers' linguistic competence, and as such they yield valuable information about the quality of EFL education in the country. Aspinall (2013: 4) sees these low scores as a considerable problem for Japanese society: "[d]ifficulty in communicating in English with the outside world is a threat to Japan's global standing and to its continued prosperity", an argument which draws direct links between foreign language education, globalism and economic development.

Academic interest in this area has only intensified in recent years. Seminal works by Aspinall (2013), McVeigh (2002), Houghton & Rivers (2013), McKenzie (2010) and Seargeant (2009) ─ to name a few ─ have provided sharp analyses of the Japanese EFL system from a wide range of perspectives. Their insights are not only pertinent to the everyday reality facing language teachers working in Japan; they also offer unique perspectives into the social and political implications of EFL education. Notably, these analysts seem to agree on two points: a) the dominant approaches to English education in Japan are not meeting the needs of learners, and b) the system is ideologically-driven by a perceived need to mitigate the impact of English on Japanese education, culture and society. The linking of these two points in a causal relationship is of particular interest to the current paper.

In this paper, I address this apparent consensus among analysts from theoretical and methodological perspectives. To facilitate this discussion, I begin by defining the theory behind a stratified approach to social research. From this basis, I then focus on EFL education at the junior high school (JHS) level. My choice of the JHS level is motivated by a variety of factors. First, EFL education has, over recent decades, become a central part of both junior and senior high schools in Japan. This means that most Japanese EFL learners begin to study English in a systematic and goal-oriented fashion at the JHS level. It is true that, since 2011, English has become a new subject in elementary schools, and that students must consequently study it for two years before moving on to JHS. Yet English education at the primary school level is still a project in its infancy, fraught with numerous problems (see Fennelly & Luxton (2011), Goto-Butler (2004), Nikolova (2008) and Osada (2008)

for further discussions). Most importantly, JHS education, unlike the tertiary level, is closely synchronized by government policies on education. As for the high school level, educators focus mostly on language proficiency training and assessment (i.e. intensive focus on target language grammar and vocabulary) in order to prepare pupils for university entrance examinations (Kubota, 2011). In addition, less than half of Japanese high school graduates go on to university, and except for first year university students not all of them choose to study English once they have reached that level. Added to this is Hood's (2001) argument that the current trend to liberalize institutions of higher education in Japan and transform them into administrative and legal entities increasingly more independent from the government has recently been amplified as a countermeasure to falling enrolment numbers and a rapidly aging population. For these reasons, I believe that the JHS stratum of the Japanese EFL system is ideal if the goal of inquiry is to explore the links between government policies, government-sponsored EFL textbooks and classroom practices. Of course, English education at the JHS level does not represent the entire system. Nevertheless, readers who are interested in gaining insight about the whole system or about other area(s) of the system can nevertheless find valuable data and insights in the current paper.

My principal concern in this paper centers on the marked tendency in current academic works to draw direct causal links between ideological discourse and educational practice without problematizing the very nature of such links — if indeed they do exist. I opine that a social realist-oriented stratified perspective both allows for such problematization and provides a more complex and richer view into the Japanese EFL system.

1. A stratified approach to studying social phenomena, events and processes

In defining a stratified approach to studying social phenomena, it is necessary to first outline two basic tenets of social realism. The first tenet is that reality (i.e. ontological knowledge) is distinct from human accounts of reality (i.e. epistemological knowledge). A central justification for this distinction is that, as Sealey & Carter (2004) point out, epistemological accounts "are inescapably partial" (p.105). Bhaskar (1975, 1991, 1998, 2008) explains that much of social research tends to conflate ontological and epistemological knowledge. Bhaskar (1998) and Sayer (2000) label this conflation an 'epistemic fallacy'. They argue that it is difficult to make definite claims about the world through scientific means, but that through a combination of research methods and empirical perspectives, claims can become more plausible. Bhaskar (1998) holds that it is possible to observe the

kind of results obtained through multi-disciplinary research, and then ask the question *what is it about the world which makes such things happen?* Because this question directly addresses the relationship between epistemology and ontology, it constitutes a prime concern for social realist researchers.

The second tenet of social realism is that, in observing social phenomena and processes, researchers must remember that there are differences between what people think, do and say they do. Likewise, researchers should remember that there are differences between institutional processes, cultural mechanisms and social practices at the local level. While it is clear that all of these share common attributes and influence one another in complex ways, any empirical research program devoted to analyzing the complexity of particular social phenomena must begin and end with a clear understanding of these differences. In addition, researchers must collect a wide range of empirical evidence and combine a variety of research methods in order to gain a better understanding of such complexity. This summarizes the social realist-oriented stratified approach I advocate in this paper.

Let's apply these tenets to the notion proposed by analysts that the Japanese EFL system is ideologically-driven. A social realist-oriented stratified approach to studying this particular question begins by defining ideologies as abstract entities shaped by various ideas and perspectives, and projecting particular views of the world. In and of themselves, however, ideologies cannot do things in the real world. This means that claiming — albeit metaphorically — that an ideology 'convinces' people of something, or that it 'limits' people's freedom to do particular things, confuses discourse with practice (i.e. the real-world actions performed by human beings). Fairclough (1992: 27) calls this type of conflation a "systematic mystification of agency", a rhetorical strategy which turns "processes and activities into states and objects, and concretes into abstracts" (p.182). In other words, this type of confusion not only oversimplifies complex social processes, it complicates a realist understanding of real-world events.

The social realist perspective holds that in any social situation it is people who do things, not abstract entities. Consequently, it is people who formulate — and challenge — ideologies through discourse practices and/or physical actions. As such, an empirical inquiry into ideology begins with a conceptualization of people's actions as distinct from ideological discourse (i.e. discourse and social practices as separate 'things'). This is not to suggest that

ideologies are 'less real' than people's actions. In fact, ideologies and beliefs are very real to us. More importantly, we draw from ideas and beliefs when we act in the real world. Because of that, trying to understand why people do things the way they do necessitates an inquiry into their beliefs and attitudes. But to study how ideologies and social practices are linked — which is what I believe the study of ideology should be concerned with — the focus needs to be brought back to what people actually do, for human actions are largely constitutive of social reality. Consequently, studying ideological discourse is not just about exploring the foundations of ideology (i.e. proving or disproving the veracity of its tenets), but about investigating the potential links between the ideology and what people do. This paper specifically advocates a study of the Japanese EFL context from that perspective.

The stratified approach therefore places great importance on the distinct and emergent properties of various — and interrelated — elements under investigative scrutiny. As such, it conceptualizes the social realm as constituted of three strata: *structure*, *culture* and *agency* (Archer, 1996, 2004; Carter & New, 2004; Carter & Sealey, 2000; Sealey & Carter, 2004). Sealey & Carter (2004: 184) point out that, "for the purposes of analysing and researching social phenomena [...], it is possible — and indeed desirable — to distinguish between the different domains [of structure, culture and agency], in accordance with their different properties and characteristics." Once this categorization is done, it becomes possible to gain insight into their interrelatedness. Indeed, while each stratum possesses distinct and emergent properties, it should also be conceptualized as linked to other strata of the social realm. In sum, a stratified approach is concerned with a) how structure, culture and agency are distinct from one another, and b) the relationship which binds them together. I now sketch a definition for each stratum.

Structure refers to the "enduring, affording and constraining influences of the social order" (Sealey & Carter, 2004: *xiii*). The notion of 'enduring influences' means that structure possesses the property of anteriority, i.e. the notion that something has existed before us and that it will keep on existing once we die. The notions of 'affording and constraining influences' means that structure provides us with both sets of possibilities to act in the real world as well as limits on those actions. In other words, structure allows us to act and be creative, albeit within certain parameters. Some examples of structural entities are languages, education systems, and social institutions. However, as structure cannot be entirely divorced from other social strata, studying it requires a perspective into both culture and

agency.

Some may argue that an entity which allows us to act in certain ways while constraining us is analogous to *culture*. But Archer (1996) disagrees, arguing that culture is a more complicated notion. As she points out, "[w]hat culture is and what culture does are issues bogged down in a conceptual morass from which no adequate sociology of culture has been able to emerge" (p.2). I believe that an example of this conceptual morass can be found in the large proportion of cultural studies which show a propensity towards reducing the complexity of particular social units to specific sets of behaviors or actions (e.g. 'In Japan, people bow' or 'Canadian people do not remove their shoes in the house'). This perspective is rooted in the problematic assumption that specific behaviors or actions define the inherent nature of the culture to which they are attached, and in the same process the individuals who are said to belong to that culture. This approach is characteristic of anthropological functionalism. According to Yoshino (1992), anthropological functionalism "explains social practices in terms of their contribution to society as a whole" (p.24). This view is problematic because it imposes a particular order in otherwise highly differentiated and dynamic systems such as societies and cultures. To do that, proponents of anthropological functionalism are forced to dismiss variations within society as exceptions to perceived general rules. In Bouchard (2012), I discussed the functionalist approach to analyzing Japanese culture in greater detail. I referred to Benedict's (1946) book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Nakane's (1973) *Japanese Society* and Doi's (1986) *The Anatomy of Self* as classic examples of anthropological functionalism. Even if these books have been published more than a quarter century ago and that their methodological approaches and insights have now been largely dismissed, I have noticed a marked inclination in academic studies focusing on Japan and the Japanese education system to select specific evidence from the available data in order to define Japan and/or the Japanese education system as a unified and fixed entity. In other words, even if most researchers nowadays outwardly reject anthropological functionalism, they apparently have yet to formulate a significantly contrastive approach to the study of culture.

While a functionalist view into Japan holds that Japanese society is created by social unity and consensus, a social realist approach emphasizes social diversity which, according to Maxwell (2012), is not only real but fundamental to understanding social organizations and cultures in all their complexity. By emphasizing contiguity rather than similarity between

the members of a particular community, Maxwell argues that solidarity is created by processes which have less to do with similarities or commonalities between individuals, and more with contiguity, or a combination of differences and complementarity between people. I believe that this epistemological perspective constitutes a significant move away from anthropological functionalism, and is an appropriate application of a stratified approach to studying the Japanese EFL system. By focusing on contiguity, differences and complementarity, it is also possible to retain a valuable critical eye on both the object of criticism and the critique itself.

Considering that culture possesses the property of anteriority (e.g. Japanese temples, music, food, etc.), it shares, to some extent, certain characteristics with structure. However, Archer (1996) argues that, like functionalism, this view can potentially propagate the myth of cultural integration (i.e. culture as integrated system), thus leaning towards functionalism. To resolve this tension, it is important for social researchers to reject the notion of culture as a system with an internal logic and fundamental coherence. Instead, culture should be conceptualized as a combination of differences and complementarity between people. To facilitate this theoretical shift, Archer distinguishes between the *Cultural System* (cultural knowledge, beliefs, norms, language, mythology, etc.) and the *Socio-Cultural domain* (how people adopt, reproduce, resist or challenge the Cultural System). Accordingly, the Cultural System predates the Socio-Cultural domain, which transforms it. In that sense, while the Cultural System may be said to possess the property of anteriority, the Socio-Cultural domain distances culture from both a) structure, and b) the notion of a unified entity with an internal logic and a fundamental coherence. This stratified approach to understanding culture is more convincing because the complexity of culture and agentive processes becomes the main focus of inquiry.

Finally, Sealey & Carter (2004: 11) relate *agency* with self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition, and emotionality. To me, agency refers to what people actually do, and the motivations behind their actions. Obviously, agency cannot be entirely divorced from structure or culture. But it is important to specify that it possesses properties which exist beyond the other two strata of the social realm. After all, people's actions can never be entirely explained by structural or cultural processes. As Bloome et al. (2005: 141) argue:

> individuals are more than simply pawns who are either manipulated by or

crushed by powerful social forces [...] There are powerful forces at work that sometimes drive the construction of social identity, but it is limiting to assume that social identities and subject positions are generally only adopted or resisted.

This argument brings forth the possibility that certain aspects of personal and social identity exist beyond discourse, or the range of possible choices made available by social structures.　For this precise reason, Archer (1996) argues that in social research, "we need to specify, first, which Systemic relations impinge upon agency and how they do so; and, second, which social relations affect how agents respond to and react back on the Cultural System" (p.xxi).　According to her, reflexivity ― which she defines as "the quintessential reflective ability of human beings to fight back against their conditioning" (p.xxvi) ― should be the focus of social research.　Elder-Vass (2010) discusses Archer's notion of reflexivity as one of agency's distinguishing properties in the following way:

> [f]or Archer, reflexivity is a power that human beings possess: it is the ability to monitor ourselves in relation to our circumstances [...] It is exercised through a process of conscious *reflexive deliberations*, during which we conduct internal conversations with ourselves about ourselves [...] Such reflexivity, she argues, is a precursor to the development of a *personal identity* and a *social identity* (p.102)

In other words, studying agency form the angle of reflexivity means locating instances where people's actions somehow 'go against the grain', i.e. actions and intentions which cannot be accounted for by hegemonic structures such as 'common sense' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991).

Here, a distinction needs to be made between *agents* and *actors*.　Archer (2004) places the agent before the actor or, to put it another way, as the 'parent' of the actor: "[w]e become Agents *before* we become Actors.　In other words, Agency is a springboard to positions in the total role array" (p.284).　This distinction is important because it points to the moment where individual identity emerges as agentive processes unfold.　The author adds that "[t]he Actor's real interests come with the role she or he has chosen to personify."　In essence, this choice unfolds within reflexivity.　The agent may draw from structural and/or cultural

forces, but there is a point where the actor 'emerges'. I interpret this point as a 'moment of choice' where personal and social identities take shape.

By placing agentive processes at the center of empirical inquiry, the stratified approach contrasts significantly from most contemporary research focusing on the Japanese EFL context. However, not everyone agrees with this type of emphasis. Kabel (2009) rejects the prioritization of agency, arguing that researchers should not focus on agency alone out of a 'preference' for what people do. He cites the anthropologist Asad (1996), who argued that social researchers should not prioritize agency simply because the notion is appealing to them, or because not doing so may appear morally reprehensible.

I entirely disagree with this argument. A focus on agency in social research is central to understanding the complexity of social processes because a) agency constitutes a fundamental stratum of the social world (along with culture and structure), b) agency possesses distinct and emergent — i.e. *sui generis* — properties (the same goes for culture and structure), and c) the complexity of social processes is most visible at the level of agency. Therefore, I conclude that Kabel and Asad's argument is misguided.

From what has been said so far, it is becoming clearer that a focus on agentive processes, or what people actually do, raises critical questions concerning accounts which depict EFL education in Japan as ideologically-driven. This is because such accounts overemphasize structure at the detriment of agency. Despite this conflation, portrayals of the Japanese EFL system as oppressive have gained wide support in academia, notably by writers such as Kubota (1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2011), McVeigh (1998, 2000, 2002), Rivers (2011) and Yoneyama (1999). Yoneyama (1999) assesses the Japanese school system in the following way:

> The Japanese high school to which students are bound [...] is a stifling place. Its organisational structure is extremely formal, rigid, and autocratic. Not only student-teacher relationships, but relationships between teachers and between students are hierarchical. Student-teacher communication is typically teacher-centred, one-way and top-down, and the student-teacher relationship is bureaucratic, distant and impersonal. In this milieu, students largely do not expect things like understanding, respect and

personal care from teachers. Paternalistic care is nothing but a myth. Students are assigned a subordinate role and expected to remain silent (p. 244).

Rivers (2011: 121) intensifies this argument thus: "an active socio-political struggle for control over the identity and minds of the nation's youth is being actively and aggressively fought out within the battlefield of the school classroom." To me, these two arguments clearly overlook agentive processes, or the perspective(s) of 'the nation's youth'. Because of that, I underline the need for critical readers to question whether or not this omission serves a particular epistemological — if not ideological — stance.

With this theoretical description of the stratified approach to social research, I now focus on JHS English education. Below, I summarize analyses of this stratum of the Japanese EFL system. Then, I provide a response to those analyses by applying a social realist-oriented stratified approach to the study of English education in Japan.

2. EFL education in JHS

EFL education in JHS is constituted by various elements of different nature (i.e. each possessing distinct properties): texts (government EFL policies, government-approved EFL textbooks, media coverage of recent and ongoing EFL policy changes, external EFL proficiency tests), beliefs (situated interpretations of and reactions to government policies, exams and textbooks), and processes (EFL classroom discourse practices, including classroom implementations of government policies, influence of exams on classroom practices, and localized uses of EFL textbooks). Moreover, these various constituents include objects (textbooks, language policy documents and tests), people (teachers, students, school administrators and policy makers) and institutions (schools, governmental organisms concerned with education, institutions involved in generating and administering tests).

In this Section, I try to address each of these elements of the Japanese EFL system. To do so, I draw from a wealth of academic works focusing on EFL textbooks and government policies at the JHS level, as well as JHS English education in general. Throughout this summary, I apply the stratified approach and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of these academic works, and reiterate my central argument for the need to emphasize agentive processes in the study of the Japanese EFL system.

2.1 Analyzing text: EFL policies and textbooks at the JHS level

Recent EFL policies and studies published by the Japanese Government (CAGI, 2007; CJGTC, 2000; MEXT, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2011a,b,c,d, 2012, 2013; MoE, 1989, 1992, 1994) are a valuable source of data about JHS English education. Both descriptive and prescriptive documents, these represent the multiple — and conflicting — perspectives of institutionalized education in the country, and yield insights into Japanese cultural assumptions about the target language and culture. Seargeant (2009) identifies these as part of a network of 'ideologies of English' in Japan. They also provide some degree of understanding of how a) Japanese JHS teachers make pedagogical choices in context (O'Donnell, 2005; Sakui, 2004; Tsushima, 2011; Yoshida, 2003), and b) how JHS students engage with target language learning tasks (Hugues, 2005). Of course, the MEXT policies are government-sanctioned documents, and as such are perhaps the most visible expressions of concern over internationalization in Japanese education (Gainey & Andressen, 2002; Gorsuch, 1998, 2000; Goto-Butler & Iino, 2005; Hashimoto, 2009; Kawai, 2007; Liddicoat, 2007; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). In one of his 2008 public addresses, the then Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda called for improvements in the quality and quantity of EFL textbooks as well as ways to enhance the quality of EFL education in the country. As my review of analyses of the MEXT policies show, his call has yet to be fully answered.

2.1.1 MEXT policies on JHS English education

Most studies on Japanese EFL policies (Aspinall, 2013; 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 policies and schools' capacity to implement them. However, schools' ability to successfully implement government policies on EFL education most likely depend on a variety of factors including the quality of teacher training programs in universities and teachers' L2 abilities. Kanno (2008) focuses on broader issues by studying the impact of socio-economic realities on EFL education in Japan. Unfortunately, few studies highlighting the gap between Japanese EFL policies and classroom practices — except Browne & Wada (1998), Hato (2005), O'Donnell (2005), O'Neill (2009), and Sakui (2004) — include data collected from educators and school administrators.

Perhaps the most significant change at the policy level occurred a decade ago when MEXT outlined a new approach to EFL education in its 2003 Course of Study (MEXT, 2002,

2003a,b). While subsequent revisions of the 2003 Plan have been published, evidence shows that ongoing policy discourse at the institutional level hasn't changed much since 2003.

The general agreement amongst researchers is that the 2003 Plan's emphasis on the STEP and TOEIC Tests as central means of measuring learners' success is problematic. Current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently announced the Government's intention to move away from TOEIC and prioritize TOEFL. But this potential change does little to address fundamental questions: why does a government-regulated EFL system choose commercial tests as main points of reference? Can the education system devise more effective ─ and most importantly, appropriate ─ means of self-regulation which pertain directly to its stated objectives? Most analysts argue that the authors of the 2003 Plan failed to justify their choice of commercial tests as benchmarks for success. Some argue otherwise, stressing that non-biased, non-government-regulated tests are needed to objectively assess the effectiveness of system as a whole. However, significant contradictions and discrepancies become apparent when comparing government policies on EFL education with what these tests are actually meant to assess. In other words, crucial issues of test validity seem to have been overlooked by policy makers.

Another common criticism found in the literature on the Japanese EFL system concerns the 'culture of competition' resulting from an intensifying focus on language testing. Not only is the validity of commercial tests questioned, the impact of intensive and repetitive testing on Japanese EFL classroom practices and on English language education as a whole has been identified as a central and debilitating problem. Interestingly, these conclusions mirror concerns raised by school administrators and educators (Hato, 2005) who point out that the exam-oriented educational culture may be the heart of the problems faced by the current Japanese EFL system. MEXT (2011d) states that, "[as of 2007], about 32% of third-year junior high school students of public schools had English abilities of STEP Grade 3 or higher". Surprisingly, a survey conducted by Nippon Eigo Kentei Kyoukai (NEKK, 2003) showed that, around the time when the Action Plan was implemented, 53% of junior high school graduates had passed the 3rd level of the STEP Test. This reveals two possible conclusions: the EFL system has become less effective in preparing students for the STEP Test, and the Ministry's goals are overly ambitious.

While many critics point to the unfeasibility of the 2003 Plan, others go even further by

arguing that this confusing approach to policy design is not only intentional, it is the product of an ideological approach to policy design aimed at protecting a sense of 'Japaneseness'. This view holds that the apparent ineffectiveness of the plan is intentional (Reesor, 2002) — i.e. the current EFL policies are formulated so as to serve the Government's supposed objectives of protecting the integrity of Japan's national identity in the face of perceived western cultural pressures resulting from an increasingly unavoidable need for more effective English education in Japan. From this perspective, what many analysts argue is an unrealistic policy document is the embodiment of a particular ideological stance observable throughout the country towards English and the spread of globalism. Below, I divide the criticisms of the 2003 plan into those which emphasize its impracticality and those which emphasize its supposed ideological foundation.

2.1.1.1 The MEXT 2003 Plan as unrealistic and impractical

Hato (2005) argues that the 2003 Plan lacks "context-based criteria for evaluating the feasibility of those goals objectively" (p.39). She adds that the plan fails to a) rectify the ongoing overemphasis on exam-oriented language teaching, and b) integrate the perspective of EFL teachers. An indication of this lacuna is the Ministry's reliance on the STEP Test, which correlates poorly with government objectives. From analyzing the textual features of the MEXT policies, it appears that the Government prioritizes the measurement of L2 linguistic competence over communicative competence. Some even suggest that the overwhelming importance of proficiency testing in Japanese EFL education results in teachers 'teaching the test' as opposed to target language communicative competence. With the Ministry's reliance on the STEP and TOEIC Tests — and if we consider Prime Minister Abe's call, an eventual shift towards the TOEFL Test — as central measures for both learners' L2 proficiency and the effectiveness of the Japanese public school EFL system, Hato argues that Japanese EFL students and teachers now see success on L2 proficiency exams — and not communicative abilities in the target language — as the core objective of EFL education. Because everyone's central concern appears to be English education for exam purposes, the 2003 Plan seems inadequate in addressing the need for greater communicative skills in the L2.

But perhaps more important is Hato's (2005) argument that there is simply not enough classroom time allocated for teachers and students to meet the Government's proposed objectives. She concludes that "[t]he impractical goals of the Action Plan will very likely

generate cynicism among teachers as a result of their dissatisfaction or disappointment at the central authorities' disregard for the reality of students and their learning conditions" (p.43). Aspinall (2013: 185) makes this point even more explicitly: "[t]he Ministry of Education's stated goals for the expected levels attained by fifteen-year-olds [JHS graduates] are ridiculously overambitious given the time and resources available." Similar conclusions were reached by Gainey & Andressen (2002), Gorsuch (2000) and Komatsu (2002) in reference to the EFL system prior to the 2003 Plan. After the publication of the 2003 Plan, these criticisms were reiterated by Hugues (2005), O'Donnell (2005), Sakui (2004) and Yoshida (2003).

This begs the question of how educational policies in Japan are created in the first place. To address this issue, valuable insight can be gained by looking at the processes which led to the creation of the Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities (MEXT, 2002), the precursor to the 2003 Plan. As Okuno (2007) states, this document was drafted by 20 people who met 5 times for a total of 8 hours. Considering that a) the 2003 Plan is more or less an exact rendition of the Strategic Plan of 2002, b) the 2003 Plan is widely considered as Japan's most significant step towards the improvement of English education in the country, and c) its publication led to government funding reaching 1.117 billion yen in 2004 for compulsory English teacher training (Erikawa, 2005), it becomes clear that MEXT officials follow a rather casual and top-down approach to policy design. We can also reason that some of the 2003 Plan's unrealistic aspects could have been rectified with more thorough planning and triangulation on the part of policy makers.

However, not all analyses yield negative conclusions. Nishino & Watanabe (2008) highlight the presence of 'various new movements' at the institutional level working to reduce the gap between the paradoxical objectives proposed by MEXT and the reality in EFL classrooms. Unfortunately, to support this proposition, the authors focus only on individual cases. They also specify that these 'movements' are not influential enough to steer the momentum away from the usual educational practices in Japanese schools.

2.1.1.2 The MEXT 2003 Plan as ideological

Many writers have analyzed the ideological content of the MEXT policies on foreign language education. Aspinall (2013: 158) argues that "[o]ne of the consistent themes in Japanese government policies on internationalisation is the perceived need to improve Japan's ability to promote itself in the international arena. Japan, it is argued, needs to

present a better case for itself in the court of world opinion." Writing about Japanese educational policy in the late 1990s, Kubota (1999, 2002) detected the ideology of *nihonjinron* — or the discourse on Japanese uniqueness (Befu, 1992, 2001; Befu & Manabe, 1987; Bouchard, 2012; Dale, 1986; Manabe, Befu & McConnell, 1989; Sugimoto & Mouer, 2002, Yoshino, 1992) — in government documents. According to Kubota, this focus on Japaneseness in language policy leads to a failure to acknowledge the growing multiculturalism in Japan, and to the positioning of the English language as the preserve of English-speaking countries rather than as an international language or lingua franca. Her argument is that the Japanese Government's approach to internationalization actually prioritizes the education of Japanese people to 'be Japanese' first. Hence, English education is possible only if these pupils already possess sufficient ability in their L1. Learning English then becomes merely a matter of developing sufficient linguistic competence to communicate with non-Japanese people. In similar fashion, Hashimoto (2009: 23) claims that government policies "tend to focus less on the educational needs of individual learners, and more on how TEFL contributes to the nation's economic success and [paradoxically] to the formation and maintenance of a national identity in an era of globalization" (emphasis mine). Even more explicitly, Hashimoto (2007), Kawai (2007), Kubota (2011), Liddicoat (2007, 2008), McVeigh (2002), Reesor (2002) and Sato (2004) argue that the MEXT policies on EFL education are guided specifically by the ideological discourse of *nihonjinron*.

According to most critics of the 2003 Plan, the ideological discourse of Japanese uniqueness has led to the Government's failure to a) move beyond a post-war mentality of continuous growth and wealth, and b) move beyond a 'Japan versus West' mentality and adapt to the demands of an increasingly globalized world by promoting the development of intercultural understanding through effective foreign language education. Aspinall (2013: 66) draws a direct connection between impracticality and ideology:

> [t]he disconnect between the stated goals of the Action Plan and the present reality of student performance, combined with an absence of concrete plans to overcome some of the serious obstacles (such as the lack of time) that stand in the way of serious improvement of English teaching and learning, mark out the Plan as political or ideological document rather than a genuine effort to improve performances.

Later in his book, the author label the recent MEXT Plan as driven by a nationalist ideology in an even more explicit fashion: "[t]he almost paranoid attitude of the Ministry of Education displayed by the wording of its Action Plan as one that must create 'Japanese with English abilities', however, betrays an official obsession in making sure that the teaching of English to impressionable young people does not undermine their loyalty to Japan" (p.181). This perspective suggests that the 2003 Plan's approach to improving communicative English language teaching is of a cosmetic nature, and that mitigating the impact of the target language on the national culture and on pupils' sense of national identification is the true hidden agenda.

As suggested in the previous section, most analysts agree that Japanese EFL practices remain focused on examinations (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Sakui, 2004; Seargeant, 2008, 2009; Yoshida, 2003). According to Fujimoto-Adamson (2006), Nishino & Watanabe (2008) and Reesor (2002), this contradictory approach to English education in Japan is one of the Japanese EFL system's most enduring characteristics. Kubota (2011), Liddicoat (2007, 2008), McVeigh (2002), and Reesor (2002) make the direct link between this approach to language policy design and the ideological discourse of *nihonjinron*. Their view is in line with Thompson's (2007) critical conception of ideology, which defines ideological discourse as a tool for the maintenance of relations of domination in society. Furthermore, Kubota (2011), McNamara (1997), Shohamy (2001) and Spolsky (1997) define tests as powerful tools for the Japanese Government to assert its power over policy design and educational practices, thus fulfilling specific ideological purposes. Sato (2004) believes that a strong emphasis on language testing serves to distance the target culture from the local culture. This belief is echoed in more general terms by Hashimoto (2007: 28): "[t]he efforts to make Japanese learners of English maintain their Japanese identity has shaped the way TEFL is structured in education." For the *nihonjinron* critics, testing practices are a very effective method of ensuring that, not only is there a 'safe distance' between Japanese EFL learners and the target language and culture, the Government of Japan also retains a tight control over how EFL education is conducted throughout the country. In sum, by concentrating everyone's attention on language proficiency testing, the EFL education system is said to be another method by which the Japanese Government controls its population.

Hashimoto (2009) agrees with such assessment, yet argues that the way this ideological approach is structured may not be as top-down as many believe. She asserts that there is

continuity between the policy document and public discourse on English education both in the public and private sector. This suggests that the MEXT's problematic plan is not just the Government's vision of English education but also a reflection of popular beliefs and expectations about how English education should be conducted in Japanese schools.

It is important to specify at this point that analysts who have focused on the supposed ideological bent in EFL policies have not limited their criticisms to the *nihonjinron* discourse. In the 2003 policy document, Sato (2004) identifies the presence of the *ibunkakan kyouiku* discourse, or the discourse on education for cross-cultural understanding. She argues that this discourse clashes with the *nihonjinron* discourse on Japanese uniqueness. This view is reiterated by Kawai (2007), who labels the discourse of *nihonjinron* as 'parochial nationalism', and states that it has been amplified in Japanese EFL policies along with the discourse on the necessity for English in Japan. The result is, as Sato (2004) points out, that these two contradictory discourses are locked in an irreconcilable struggle, resulting in the *ibunkakan kyouiku* discourse paradoxically serving the *nihonjinron* discourse. Her conclusion is that the EFL system in Japan is, at the surface level, aiming to provide Japanese people with the means to fully integrate a global community, while at a deeper level aiming to reaffirm a stronger sense of Japaneseness in reaction to increased globalization. Seargeant (2008: 132) argues that

> [t]he idea of Japanese ethnocentrism, and its possible consequences for English language education, is closely connected to *kokusaika* [internationalization], which has been a concept of great relevance for the perception of the English language in Japan over the last two decades. *Kokusaika* [...] came to prominence in Japan in the 1980s and is often considered by social historians to have been a response by the government to foreign pressure for Japan to open up its markets.

Similar assessments of the MEXT Plan of 2003 have been produced by Hashimoto (2007, 2009), Liddicoat (2007, 2008), McVeigh (2002), Nishino & Watanabe (2008), and Reesor (2002). Reesor (2002: 41) specifically argues that "ambiguity and contradiction have been (and remain) the focus of policy initiatives [...] these characteristics are the result of a conscious effort by policy-makers to ensure access to foreign ideas without sacrificing Japanese identity." In other words, Reesor proposes that the ideology which is apparently motivating

EFL policy design is the result of conscious decisions on the part of government officials.

To this discussion, Kobayashi (2007) adds that the *nihonjinron*, the *ibunkakan kyouiku* and the *kokusaika* discourses are not the only ideologies at work in the 2003 Plan. She denotes an ideological tendency in the plan towards reproducing gender stratification in Japan, arguing that the plan's "rhetoric tends to mask intersecting complexities around policy enactments, globalizing tendencies, and gender stratifications" (p.566). She concludes that the ubiquitous discourses of globalization and internationalization in the 2003 Plan cloud important discussions of gender issues and of women's unequal access to business opportunities.

It is important, however, to relate these conflicting approaches to policy designs with tendencies and movements beyond Japan's borders. In that respect, we can see that the *kokusaika* discourse echoes the *ibunkakan kyouiku* discourse, which is itself a version of another ideological discourse in contemporary educational philosophy around the world. The notion of English education for the integration of non-English speaking communities is, according to Aspinall (2013), part of a network of political and economic strategies emerging from current neo-liberal trends guiding globalism. The author argues that this perspective towards education is actively promoted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and appears to be widely accepted around the world. This vision of English for increasing globalization first defines globalism as "an inexorable process, something beyond political debate" (Aspinall, 2013: 19). Furthermore, this approach not only promotes the idea that education systems around the globe can be compared according to common standards aimed at measuring their quality and effectiveness, it also promotes the notion that education is principally concerned with providing people with the types of skills and knowledge needed to participate in a global market economy, English being one of these. The important thing to remember here is that, while the spread of globalism around the world is inevitable and, as the supporters of neo-liberalism would argue, for the greater good of everyone, the responses by local communities are various and often conflicting. Contemporary analyses report that non-English-speaking populations can simultaneously embrace and resist the 'globalism through English' paradigm.

The *nihonjinron* critics, however, propose a simpler picture. They conclude that the notion of English for international understanding — which defines the *kokusaika* discourse —

is not being promoted by the Government nor supported by the population at large because it is seen as affecting the very nature of Japaneseness.   To put it simply, these critics hold that the reality of a rapidly changing world is perceived as a threat to the Japanese nation, and that the OECD's globalist vision is generally resisted in Japan.   One of the results is that policies on EFL education are 'reformulated' so as to serve *nihonjinron*-oriented beliefs and the protection of Japanese culture and society.   It is argued that the hegemonic structure of *nihonjinron* ultimately prevails over other ideologies.

One possible indication of this particular ideological tendency in the 2003 Plan is its dual emphasis on English and Japanese.   Arguing that the discourse on the preservation and promotion of Japaneseness has always been an integral part of Japan's EFL policies, Hashimoto (2009) points out that in policy documents issued prior to the 2003 plan, "[t]he enrichment of Japanese language and culture through interaction with other cultures and languages was seen as the solution to the problems that Japan was facing in the international community" (p.27).   Looking at the 2003 Plan, we can see that the Government not only proposes strategies to improve English education but also emphasizes the need to simultane-ously improve Japanese language education.   However, critics of the Plan argue that English and Japanese are not given equal status.   A rapid glance reveals that English is referred to as a 'tool' (incidentally, native-English speaking teachers are also referred to as 'tools' or as 'resources').   From this, critics suggest that the Government effectively defines the national language as the core of Japanese identity, making English the instrument with which Japanese citizens can then interact with the rest of the world for the purpose of teaching non-Japanese people about Japaneseness.   This line of argument precedes Aspinall's (2013) point that recent EFL policies promote the idea that Japan needs to present a better case for itself in the court of world opinion.   As Liddicoat (2007: 20.13) argues,

> the nature of interculturality as it is presented in these documents is profoundly shaped by ideologies surrounding Japanese understandings of the Japanese self.   The ideological context of [n]*ihonjinron* constructs the Japanese self as unique and this privileges a position in international communication of needing to communicate this uniqueness to others.

In fact, this link between the notion of Japanese uniqueness and EFL education has long been reiterated by many top-ranking Japanese officials.   In early 2007, the then MEXT top

administrator, Bunmei Ibuki, argued for a new approach to EFL education in country while claiming that "Japan has been historically governed by the Yamato (proto-Japanese) race. Japan is an extremely homogenous country" (Ibuki: Japan 'extremely homogenous', 2007). This view was also expressed in the 1980s by former Prime Minister Nakasone — a politician whose crucial influence on the Japanese EFL system is still subject of analysis — and by various other Ministry officials since. From this we can deduce that, at the government level at least, the conceptualization of English education seems to require some sort of perspective towards education in the national language, which acts as a force mitigating the perceived threat coming from English and western cultures.

The MEXT Plan of 2003 has been defined as both impractical and ideologically-driven. Some analysts argue that these two characteristics are not mutually exclusive. The next section discusses the general reception of the Plan by teachers and school administrators.

2.1.2 School administrators and teachers' reception of the Plan

This section is devoted to a discussion on how the MEXT Plan of 2003 has so far been received by the actors responsible for its implementation in schools. From the available body of work on the subject, it is possible to suggest that government-sanctioned policies on EFL education generally have a limited impact on what Japanese EFL teachers choose to do in their classrooms. In other words, instead of perceiving these policies as prescriptive guidelines, EFL teachers may simply see them as suggestions. One indication of this is the often cited impression amongst teachers that the MEXT policies fail to consider the reality in Japanese schools. Indeed, evidence shows that many EFL teachers across the country believe that these policy documents lack concrete goals and strategies for implementation in localized contexts. Instead, the MEXT Plan of 2003 only mentions that the set of guidelines it proposes needs to be translated into a 'Can-Do list' by each school. From the perspective of teachers, this effectively transforms the Plan as a 'menu' from which they can choose, thereby limiting its importance.

As such, analysts report a generally negative reception of the 2003 Plan among educators and school administrators. While changes in EFL policies were widely anticipated prior to its publication, and that some teachers welcomed the Ministry's reforms with a certain degree of optimism, many JHS educators saw the 2003 Plan as an unnecessary and impractical addition to the existing curriculum (O'Donnell, 2005; O'Neill, 2009). One common argu-

ment centers on the Plan's confusing — and at times contradictory — emphases, some of which were discussed in the previous sections.   Tanabe (2004: 3) underlines the dual emphasis on improving students' English skills and the nurturing of the national language, Japanese, as an example of such contradiction.   Hato (2005: 43) echoes the views expressed by many Japanese EFL educators, and concludes that the impracticality of the 2003 Course of Study generates cynicism among teachers because of the Government's apparent disregard for the reality 'on the ground'.

This situation is, however, not unique to Japan.   Nunan (2003) makes a similar observation in regards to EFL policies in Asian countries.   He argues that, "although […] government rhetoric stresses the development of practical communication skills, this is rarely reflected at the classroom level, where the emphasis is on the development of reading and writing skills for the purposes of passing entrance examinations into senior high school and college" (p.600).   Also discussing the development of English language policies in East Asia in response to the spread of English as an international language, Shen (2009: 116) argues that, as a general trend, East Asian governments "are framing policies and implementing practices in the language area without adequately considering the implications of such policies and practices on the lives of the teachers and students they affect."   Thus, Hato's (2005) own criticism of the 2003 Plan as disconnected from the reality of the Japanese EFL classroom appears to parallel the reality found in other East Asian nations.

In Bouchard (2013), I point out that this tendency in the Japanese EFL system to nurture two largely separate sets of practices — policy design and classroom practice — reaches as far back as the Meiji era.   Prior to the implementation of the 2003 Plan, Reesor (2002) suggested three causes for the gap between EFL policy and practice: the entrance examination system, the textbook selection process, and teacher education.   Some analysts, including Tanabe (1999), argue that the continued contradiction between educational policy and practice is due less to teacher conservatism than to the standards set and influence wielded by post-secondary institutions.   This top-down pressure is another characteristic of the Japanese EFL system which has been reported extensively in the literature.

In sum, while educators may see the MEXT policies as innovative, although idealistic and somehow detached from reality, their real concern may not be with what MEXT has to say about EFL education but more with preparing their pupils for university entrance exams,

which is widely seen as the hidden curriculum. From this perspective, genuine innovations in the Japanese EFL system may necessitate concrete steps to be taken at the tertiary level, especially with regard to universities' recruitment policies. Without such change, the confusion between policy design and actual EFL practice in the classroom might continue to exacerbate the currently fractured educational system where teachers are torn between contradictory educational objectives (Sakui, 2004).

But the overall picture may not be so grim. In fact, the 2003 Plan does point towards a way out by granting teachers and schools with more freedom to implement educational guidelines. Goto-Butler & Iino (2005: 29) hold that traditionally "curricula at the junior and high school levels in Japan have been controlled to a great extent by the guidelines set by the MEXT, and teachers have had relatively limited control over such curricula." However, the authors argue that the 2003 Plan gives greater autonomy to teachers and local governments — the 'Can-Do list' suggestion stated above being a good example of this. They also suggest that "it may provide teachers and their local community with greater opportunities to become active participants in the development of language education policies, rather than simply being passive consumers of such policies" (p.26). This argument is also made by Tanabe (2004).

2.1.3 Impact of the plan on EFL classroom practice

In this sub-section, I focus on reports of classroom changes as a result of the Plan's implementation. To begin with, the 2003 Course of Study is devoted to the improvement of all school subjects taught in Japanese schools, and not just EFL education. Sarkar Arani & Fukaya (2010) report on the results gathered from a research conducted by MEXT in 2003: "[i]t appears that Japanese students' motivation for learning and studying especially changed in the junior high school level since the beginning of the new course of study. [...] international comparison of scholastic achievement shows that Japanese students' rank and quality decreased in the various subject matters" (p.68). This gradual drop can be observed in JHS students' falling scores in math and science, and the reported deteriorating attitudes of students towards studying in general. Yet, it is important to stress that this negative trend may not have been the result of the 2003 Plan's implementation, for the MEXT study of 2003 was conducted a few months after the Plan's publication, leaving insufficient time for educators and learners to fully adjust to the new curriculum. However, eight years after this study, MEXT (2011d) stated that about 30 percent of third-year JHS students believed that

they could not follow English classes. This proportion was higher than in other subjects. This figure is significant, especially considering that more than 60 percent of first year JHS students reported liking English.

Soon after the publication of the Plan, Yoshida (2003) mentioned the existence of a task force aimed at measuring the impact of the 2003 Plan on actual educational practices in Japanese public schools. Eight years later, two documents published by MEXT (2011d, 2012) demonstrated that the goals set by the 2003 Plan have met with very modest results:

> [v]erification of the implementation of the Action Plan showed that certain results were achieved but the requirements for students and English teachers in terms of English proficiency and other skills were not met in full, and that tasks and policies for English education in this country have to be revised in order to truly cultivate Japanese with English abilities (MEXT, 2011d: 2).

Furthermore, many analysts agree that implementation of the Plan has been slow to come, suggesting two possibilities: a) implementation of government proposals in schools is a problematic process deserving further study, and b) the Plan's lack of effective means of self-regulation needs to be addressed closely.

O'Donnell (2005) concludes that "current reform measures appear to be implemented unevenly within the educational system" (p.300). Gorsuch's (2000) study of institutional pressures faced by language teachers mainly addresses teachers' perceptions and approval of CLT-oriented policies. O'Donnell's (2005) study identifies three reasons for the problematic implementation of CLT in Japanese EFL classroom: intrusion of non-teaching duties into teachers' curricular responsibilities, institutional restrictions in the workplace, and the complex ways reforms are interpreted and implemented in schools. In short, while many analysts criticize policy makers' confusing and contradictory approach to policy design, O'Donnell's (2005) criticism suggests that the problems are located more at the level of policy implementation (i.e. in schools). In a MEXT publication of 2011 (MEXT, 2011d: 4), this problem is also underlined: "While many schools conduct classes in compliance with the Courses of Study, some schools are reported to focus on grammar-translation learning, or on preparation for entrance exams to senior high schools or universities."

As this indicates, institutional pressures can affect a) teachers' perceptions and approval of CLT-oriented policies, and b) the actual implementation of CLT methodology in Japanese English classrooms. In other words, teachers' perceptions of CLT seem to have a significant impact on the way they choose to conduct their English classes. Aspinall (2013: 63–64) points out that "theories of bureaucratic inertia as well as risk avoidance help explain how a system, once it is set up, tends to continue on a path that is most comfortable and comprehensible for the members of that system." Consequently, the gap between policy design and educational practice is likely to lead to further immobilism on the part of bureaucrats (Schoppa, 1991) and detachment on the part of teachers and students.

These results and insights from the literature show a very complex reality. From the limited body of work on the subject, it is possible to suggest, however, that government-sanctioned policies on EFL education have had a limited impact on what Japanese EFL teachers choose to do in their classrooms. Komatsu (2002: 53) points out that, "for teachers, school goals lie behind teachers' daily work and do not direct their daily activities towards these goals. This situation makes school goals a mere formality" (p.53). Therefore, more research needs to be done to determine whether the 2003 Plan is effective and whether it responds to the needs of Japanese learners. Widespread agreement suggests that the ominous washback effect of entrance examinations (Amano, 1990; Gorsuch, 1998, 2000, 2001; Horio, 1988, Nunan, 2003, Tsushima, 2011) is a significant hurdle standing in the way of genuine initiatives in English education at the secondary level, and should therefore constitute a focus of inquiry for further research.

2.2 My response

From a stratified viewpoint, the analyses summarized above yield considerable insight into the complex and conflicting nature of JHS English education and the policies meant to guide it. However, in the generally negative assessments found in current academic works, I notice a tendency towards conflating structural and agentive processes. One indication of this is that there is surprisingly little data and analyses available in the literature which explores EFL teachers' perceptions of government guidelines, especially with regards to how the latter influence actual teaching practices on the ground. As my central argument in this paper highlights the need in social research to emphasize agentive processes, I believe that more research on the 'consumption' aspect of policy documents is required. The consumption aspect refers to how a text is interpreted (how it makes sense to its consumers) and how

consumers decide to integrate it — or aspects of it — in their everyday practice. In the end, any analysis of policy documents as text remains incomplete without accounts of what actually happens in EFL classrooms. Without linking discourse with real-life practice, the former remains an abstract reality of relatively little consequence.

Again, most analyses of the 2003 Plan are negative. Some focus on its impracticality while most analyses focus on its apparent ideological basis. In order to make sense of these, it is important to distinguish between the notions of impracticality and ideology. While both may share a causal relationship (e.g. impracticality resulting from ideology), this link cannot be assumed. Instead, the analyst needs to problematize the relationships which bind various elements central to a research project from theoretical and methodological standpoints. In the study of text, discourse and social practice — which is what this paper is concerned with — one cannot simply 'read off' ideology in text (Faiclough, 1992) and then draw conclusions about social practice. As such, the impracticality of the Plan and its supposed ideological basis cannot automatically be linked together without a) theoretical and methodological problematization of such links, and b) evidence found at the level of agency.

In academic works devoted to the 2003 Plan, however, impracticality is almost always conflated with ideology. As discussed earlier, Reesor (2002) argues that the MEXT policies are contradictory and therefore the result of conscious efforts on the part of policy makers to promote an ideological approach to EFL education in line with *nihonjinron*. This is a good example of a conflation between structure and agency. The notion of 'conscious efforts by policy-makers' in Reesor's work is central to his overall argument, yet the author fails to provide empirical evidence showing that policy makers are indeed consciously formulating language with *nihonjinron* in mind. By analyzing textual evidence alone, he concludes that the MEXT policies' ambiguous and contradictory nature is intentional. In contrast, a researcher adopting a social realist-oriented stratified perspective into this particular issue may not necessarily disagree with Reesor's interpretation, but would nevertheless see the need to go beyond the surface features of text by incorporating other types of evidence, the views held by policy makers being a most obvious example.

A look into Liddicoat's (2007) analysis of the 2003 MEXT Course of Study helps clarify this point further. The author quotes this conflicting portion of policy text: "*Materials that are useful in deepening international understanding from a broad perspective, heightening*

students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community, and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation." He then argues that the notion promoted by this official statement is that "Japaneseness is fundamental to accessing English, and the purposes of English are to foster Japanese identity and locate it within the context of a multicultural world" (Liddicoat, 2007: 20.10). This argument holds that the notion of Japaneseness in government policies is diametrically opposed to EFL education and the development of intercultural understanding. In fact, this type of interpretation is echoed my most critics of the 2003 Course of Study.

However, Liddicoat's positioning of the line '*heightening students' awareness of being Japanese citizens*' as central to the vision promoted by MEXT suggests that his approach to policy analysis and criticism also contains an ideological tendency. While I do not entirely reject the plausibility of his claim (indeed, the linking of '*awareness of being Japanese citizens*' with EFL education seems more or less arbitrary and has certainly raised some eyebrows over the years), I believe it is also important to point out that this particular line is preceded by the statement '*Materials that are useful in deepening international understanding from a broad perspective*' and followed by the statement '*cultivating a spirit of international cooperation.*' Because these statements contradict Liddicoat's assessment, one then has to question the reasons why the author chose to prioritize the line '*awareness of being Japanese citizens*' over the two other statements framing it.

This example highlights the inherent bias in critical analysis. While Liddicoat's criticism is interesting because it suggests possible links between written text and ideological discourse, the main problem with this type of argument is that it attaches a particular unit of text to one particular discourse type ― in this case, the ideological discourse of *nihon-jinron*. In other words, Liddicoat provides only one possibility for linking text with broader forms of discourse. In conducting critical discourse analysis (CDA), one should consider that a) ideological messages embedded in text rarely project singular visions of the world and b) specific segments of text may not necessarily belong to only one type of ideological discourse. It is for these reasons that one cannot simply 'read off' ideology in statements found in text (Fairclough, 1992). The links between text, ideology, discourse and social practice need to be theorized first, and then corroborated by other types of data.

In addition, while specific lexico-grammar units may indicate certain ideological ten-

dencies (Thompson, 2007), Fairclough (1992) ― perhaps CDA's most prominent thinker ― makes the argument that identifying social meanings requires "considering patterns and variations in the social distribution, consumption and interpretation of the text" (p.28). This means that while ideological meanings can potentially be located within a text, the ideological effect of such text cannot be taken for granted. And it is where the study of ideology in text becomes even more complex. Van Dijk (2001: 356) points out that, "[i]n many situations, ordinary people are more or less passive targets of text or talk, e.g. of their bosses or teachers, or of the authorities, such as police officers, judges, welfare bureaucrats, or tax inspectors, who may simply tell them what (not) to believe or what to do." Fairclough (1992: 90) complements this argument thus: "[i]t should not be assumed that people are aware of the ideological dimensions of their own practice. Ideologies built into conventions may be more or less naturalized and automatized, and people may find it difficult to comprehend that their normal practices could have specific ideological investments."

In sum, the relationship between ideological discourse and social practice is complex, and is not necessarily of causal nature. People may a) be either critical or uncritical of ideology; b) be either conscious or unconscious of the presence of ideology in particular texts; c) be passive towards texts and/or particular practices (i.e. without the need to question their underlying ideological basis); d) reject particular ideological structures but choose to replicate them because these allow them to fulfill more or less immediate needs; and of course e) be relatively immune to ideological discourse altogether.

A stratified approach to studying this type of question emphasizes agentive processes as well as the need for extensive theorizing and problematizing of the links between text, discourse and social practice (Fairclough, 1992). While this type of research cannot be entirely neutral (i.e. devoid of ideology), it is better equipped to face the complexity involved in studying discourse processes unfolding within the social realm.

This discussion also brings forth the need for researchers concentrating on the Japanese EFL system to amass data on teachers' views and beliefs. The main reason for this is that, as Maxwell (2012: 19) argues, "[i]ndividuals' meanings have *consequences*; how individuals act is influenced by how they think about and make sense of what is going on." The author points out that beliefs, mental frameworks, "[c]oncepts, meanings and intentions are as real as rocks; they are just not as accessible to direct observation and description as rocks"

(Maxwell, 2012: 18).   Gorsuch (2000: 677) adopts a similar perspective, from which he opines that "teachers have their own core beliefs and may not understand the pedagogical implications or even the theoretical paradigm of the proposed curriculum."   Also, as Shimahara (2002) reports, many EFL teachers approach their own classroom teaching from their personal experiences as language learners, and many have learned the target language in the Japanese EFL system pre-1992, before significant CLT-oriented EFL initiatives began to surface in Japanese educational discourse.

As such, the heart of the problems identified by most critics of the 2003 Plan may not be due solely to conflicted communication between policy makers and EFL educators working in JHS, or government officials' apparent disregard for the reality on the ground.   Amano (1990) and Browne & Wada (1998) argue that a central problem affecting the Japanese education system nowadays is the limited and ineffective formal training pre-service teachers receive.   Nunan (2003) makes a similar observation in reference to other East-Asian countries.   In fact, few academic programs in Japanese universities include courses in SLA theory as part of foreign language teacher training.   Browne & Wada (1998: 101) report that 92% of the teachers they surveyed felt that their college training inadequately prepared them for their duties as English teachers.   They also indicate very limited opportunities for Japanese EFL teachers to attend in-service seminars, possibly due to a) the scarcity of such seminars, and b) teachers' demanding schedules.   This becomes clearer when we consider that prospective Japanese EFL teachers mainly need to show certificates proving that they meet the specified target language proficiency requirements, as measured by commercial tests such as STEP and TOEIC.   In other words, to be an English teacher in Japan, one merely needs to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the target language, and some rudimentary understanding of how the education system works as a whole.   The 2003 Plan fails to mention the need for potential teachers to have an academic background in language acquisition theory and TESOL.   From this, one has to wonder if most Japanese EFL teachers are actually able to explain the theoretical and methodological value behind a) the MEXT policy proposals, and b) the types of activities they choose to adopt in their classrooms.

With this in mind, the generally poor reception of the 2003 Plan among educators and school administrators may be due in part to the latter's limited academic background in foreign language teaching.   This possibility provides some degree of explanation for why so many Japanese EFL teachers are uncomfortable with the CLT approach (Gorsuch, 2000),

despite the Plan's active promotion of communicative language skill development and learner-centered pedagogy. Indeed, Gorsuch (2000: 700) suggests that "[t]he current educational culture in Japan probably precludes teachers' use of activities associated with CLT." Another important factor to underline is the possibility that not all teachers actually know the content of the MEXT policies. Browne & Wada (1998: 104) indicate that two third of the teachers they surveyed had actually read the policy documents.

With limited understanding comes a fear of change. The traditional grammar-translation approach — widely seen as the norm in Japanese schools — may simply be an easier, more comforting option for many Japanese EFL teachers. In his qualitative study of teachers' reception of the MEXT policies, O'Donnell (2005) reports one teacher commenting that conservative teachers may not be "willing or able to change [...] they have too much to lose personally and professionally to embrace change" (p.313).

In addition, the day-to-day pressures faced by EFL teachers in Japan constitute another credible reason for the apparent gap between policy design and educational practices. Indeed, Tanabe's (1999) argument that the Japanese EFL system's contradictions are largely because of the standards set and influence wielded by post-secondary institutions may be more relevant here than Gorsuch (2000) and O'Donnell's (2005) argument about teacher conservatism.

But overall, few can disagree with the view that Japanese EFL educators currently face significant pressures coming from many directions. Gorsuch (2000) lists eight different types of pressures faced by language teachers, which she sees as impacting their perceptions and approval of CLT-oriented policies and activities:

① influences of pre-service teacher education;

② colleagues and principals;

③ local syllabi;

④ class size;

⑤ students' English abilities and expectations;

⑥ teachers' English-speaking ability;

⑦ university entrance exams; and

⑧ parental expectations.

To this list, I add the often cited extra-curricular duties that the majority of Japanese teachers must fulfill every day (O'Donnell 2005). Hence, the day-to-day reality faced by Japanese EFL teachers may have little to do with government-sanctioned policies advocating a change towards CLT and learner-centered methods, and more to do with a wide range of issues and problems not directly related to EFL education.

Again, the gap between policy and classroom practice is not necessarily an omnipresent reality for language teachers. Sarkar Arani & Matoba (2006) argue that some educators are currently investing a significant amount of energy trying to improve their educational practices in the direction of a more learner-centered educational philosophy, this since the publication of the 2003 Plan. In other words, the Plan may be problematic at the levels of design and implementation. But it may also motivate some educators to improve their teaching practice. This indicates that institutional pressures may lead to many different types of responses on the ground, ranging from dynamic innovations to paralyzing insularism. But without further analyses of empirical evidence found at the level of agency, these remain mere extrapolations.

So far, the focus has been placed on government policies. The next section deals with EFL textbooks, which constitute another type of printed text.

2.3 JHS English textbooks

While Japanese EFL teachers do have some degree of freedom to select or design supplementary materials for classroom use, MEXT stipulates that JHS English teachers must use at least one government-approved textbook as core classroom material. To facilitate this process, the Government of Japan approves a limited number of textbooks (approximately five or six), which are then made available to local authorities. These are responsible for purchasing them and making them available free of cost to local JHS students and teachers.

MEXT approval of EFL textbooks does not necessarily mean that policies and text-books are homologous. Browne & Wada (1998) point out that Japanese EFL textbooks do not always reflect government policies accurately and fully. A study by Knight (1995) indicates a significant gap between textbook activities and government policies' emphasis on the development of communicative skills. In fact, every MEXT-approved textbook comes

with a teacher's manual listing detailed lesson plans that focus on grammar-translation and drill practice (Browne & Wada, 1998: 105). With translation as a central pedagogical goal, almost all English textbooks used at the JHS level display Japanese as the predominant language, with a few English words and sentences appearing here and there.

However, Aspinall (2013) sees a clearer connection between policies and textbooks, pointing out that MEXT prescribes, on the one hand, a large amount of vocabulary words and grammar points to be taught, and on the other, communicative approaches to English education. He adds that the English sentences found in those textbooks do not reflect natural use but are obvious translations into English from Japanese sentences, an indication that the grammar-translation approach remains pervasive. Reesor (2002: 49) provide a similar argument: "textbooks have not been adapted to reflect a more communicative classroom [...] it has been shown that the ministry does not approve textbooks which reflect the commitment in the 1994 Course of Study to develop students' communicative abilities." As was argued in the previous section on EFL policies, Reesor's main argument is that the contradictory approach to EFL in Japan is intentional — i.e. promoting the development of communicative skills at the level of policy design yet deliberately impeding this process at the level of textbook design.

Of course, EFL textbooks are not simply containers of target language vocabulary words and lexico-grammar units through short written discourse and dialogs. They project particular visions of the target language and culture, and as such they have socio-political implications. Taylor-Mendes (2009: 65) elaborates on this point by arguing that "students — consciously or unconsciously — use, absorb, and interpret the social, economic, and racial realities present in the photographs, cartoons or pictures in their textbooks." Accordingly, even if textbook writers and publishers aim to provide learners with neutral materials, learners do not necessarily perceive them as such. This is illustrated in Taylor-Mendes' (2009) study where participants observed that "the images did not represent the culture but rather seem to reinforce a made-in-Hollywood version of culture that does not exist (and likely never existed)" (p.65).

Tajima (2011) explores ideological messages in the government-approved *Columbus 21 English Course* (C21) series (Togo et al., 2006), a popular English textbooks used by JHS students and teachers. Looking at the title alone — *Columbus* (i.e. suggesting the presence

of a colonialist ideology) ― we can already anticipate Tajima's conclusions. The focus of her analysis is on the characters appearing in C21. Pointing out that "[n]early 90% of the total regular lessons [in this textbook] are somehow related to Japan and the United States, the most typical topics being holidays and traditional events" (p.331), Tajima notices a "US-only orientation established by the characters and choice of subject matter, and the contrastive representation of Japanese and US culture" (p.329). She suggests that "Hiro [the Japanese EFL learner] is described as being passive and poor at self-expression whereas Jenny is active and good at self-expression. Moreover, while Hiro has a tendency to emphasize harmony, Jenny tends to fight for justice" (p.333). Interestingly, the author points out that "Hiro gradually becomes more active and expressive by living with and learning from Jenny. [However,] despite Hiro's growth, there are no descriptions concerning Jenny's change in C21" (p.334). She concludes her analysis by suggesting that the character representation in C21 might be legitimized as "truth and knowledge" (p.334) through classrooms practices. Kumaravadivelu (2006) concludes similarly in regards to textbooks used in most EFL countries: "[e]ven textbooks on intercultural communication, with very few exceptions, still treat Western cultural practices as the communicational norm for intercultural communication across the globe" (p.19). These analyses suggest how EFL materials do not simply represent or reflect the target language and culture. In using such textbooks uncritically, EFL teachers can limit the range of possible identities for learners. As Matsuda (2002: 438) concludes, "[i]f students are exposed only to a limited section of the world, their awareness and understanding of the world may also become limited, too."

2.4 My Response

Throughout my research, I have found Tajima's study to be one of the very few interpretative works which analyze tangible textual evidence pertaining directly to the reality faced by EFL students and teachers. Thus, she provides a much needed perspective into agentive processes within the Japanese EFL system. O'Neill (2009) also achieves something similar. Equally important is Tajima's argument that EFL materials do not simply represent or reflect the target language and culture, we must also assume that EFL students and teachers do not simply reproduce the ideologies that may be at work in those textbooks.

However, more research is needed to account for the range of ideological discourses and world views promoted in government-sanctioned EFL textbooks. Such research is likely to reveal a wide variety of perspectives towards the target language and culture beyond the 'us

and them' vision promoted by the ideological discourse of *nihonjinron*. As mentioned earlier, this is because ideological messages embedded in text rarely project singular visions of the world. Gramsci (1971) suggests the notion of 'ideological complex', which defines ideological discourse as conflicting, overlapping, and intersecting with various other discourse forms. Fairclough (1992, 2010) expands on this idea by suggesting the notion of *interdiscursivity*. In other words, despite its tendency towards conflation, essentialization and unification, ideological discourse is typically disjointed and inconsistent because it is rarely about one particular thing. It is iteratively structured and restructured, articulated and rearticulated, reproduced and contested. Fairclough (1993: 99) sides with Foucault (1980) and the view that it is possible to find contradictory discourses existing side-by-side at particular points in time, in particular contexts. I believe the same can be said about text. To my knowledge, however, no work has been done to address this complexity. Therefore, I conclude that criticisms of textbooks used in JHS English classes remain incomplete because they a) mainly focus on particular ideologies, and b) concentrate on the observable textual and pictorial features of those textbooks while overlooking how they are consumed by teachers and students.

Fortunately, Tajima (2011) provides a valuable contrast by underlying a crucial limitation in her work: "research on a textbook is not sufficient without addressing the ways in which it is actually used in real classrooms [...] As the next step after critical analyses of a textbook, it is also important to explore teacher (or student) talk around the textbook. This would forward the project of challenge and resistance" (p.335). To this, I add that such additional step would most likely make the fundamental differences between textbook content and actual classroom practices more explicit.

2.5 Conceptualizing the links between EFL policies, textbooks and classroom practices
To sum up, it is crucial for analysts to consider the likely possibility that the features of text found in textbooks and language policies do not have any particular effect on the habitual thoughts and actions of classroom actors. Any claim to that effect requires the input from the text consumers. This is possible only through ethnographic inquiry, a subject which I explore in Section 3. Moreover, while the gap between policies, EFL textbooks and classroom practices are said to be considerable, more evidence is required to ascertain the validity of Reesor's (2002) claim that this gap is intended.

But ultimately, it is crucial for researchers to conceptualize the relationship(s) between MEXT policies, EFL textbooks and EFL classroom practices not necessarily as causal but as complex and organic (Maxwell, 2012). With a stronger theoretical work along those lines, researchers may conclude that language policies and textbooks are not the sole driving force behind what goes on in the classroom, even if monitored, approved, published and assessed in part by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Also, with a more prominent emphasis on agentive processes, research can potentially reveal that classroom teachers and students do enjoy a significant degree of independence from official government directives, and that this independence constitutes a major factor in the analysis of what actually goes on in the Japanese EFL system. The importance of such distinction is magnified by Komatsu's (2002: 50) revelation that "local education authorities and schools recently have more authority concerning the determination of what is the best curriculum for students."

Furthermore, any analysis of text, either spoken or written, needs to be approached from the angle of *reflexivity*. Kumaravadivelu (1999: 460) points out that "[a]nalyzing text or discourse [...] means analyzing discursive formations that are essentially political in charac-ter and ideological in content." For that reason, this type of analysis can therefore never be a politically neutral venture. In short, since there is no neutral text, it is fair to say that there is no neutral text analysis. In this sense, the issue of reflexivity highlights very important issues about the nature of our relationship with the world. As Archer (2004: 87) argues, "[t]he properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as *pregiven*, nor as *socially appropriated*, but rather these are emergent from our relations with our environment." Clearly, the complexity of this relationship — which also unfold and evolve over time — cannot be reduced to, or assumed to exist through, linear cause and effect patterns. I discuss the topic of reflexivity further in Section 5.

In the next section, I move back to a more descriptive and less theoretical type of analysis in my discussion of the Japanese JHS classroom context.

2.6 Japanese junior high schools

The Japanese JHS system extends for three years, and constitutes the last stage of compulsory education in Japan. Many analysts argue that it is a strongly egalitarian system, where very few students fail to graduate. As Aspinall (2013: 123) argues, egalitarian-ism in compulsory education is "one of the few concepts in post-war theory and practice that

has found vocal support from the Left and the Right of the political spectrum and is therefore very difficult to challenge." One of the consequences is that, in a typical Japanese JHS classroom children of varied ability are grouped together. This complicates the task of the teacher. It also means that students who perform well and those with special needs do not always benefit from classroom instruction. As such, this apparently egalitarian system may aim to unify classroom education, yet only succeeding in amplifying the differences between learners.

Below, I expand on this account of Japanese JHS classrooms by comparing and contrasting Japanese public and private JHS from the perspective of EFL education. I also focus on the Japanese EFL classroom context at the JHS level. I then discuss how the principal JHS classroom actors ― teachers and students ― operate within that context.

2.6.1 Public junior high schools

By far, the majority of JHS in Japan are public institutions. MEXT (2011d) states that 93% of all JHS in the country in 2010 (10,815 JHS to be precise) were public. According to the first postwar constitution of Japan, compulsory education was extended to age fifteen, or JHS third year. Since then, this system has persisted.

With conflicting MEXT policies and overly ambitious objectives (Aspinall, 2013), public schools face significant challenges. The unfortunate result is that these challenges are often bifurcated. As Aspinall (2013: 181) explains,

> it is undeniable that institutions in the public sector charged with improving communicative foreign language teaching have never faced any real negative consequences for failing in their mission. No bureaucrat, teacher or manager has ever been disciplined or punished for ignoring or failing to implement MEXT policies relating to English language education.

EFL education in the public school sector is, in other words, significantly impaired because few strategies for oversight are adopted. This explains the general consensus that this system has, for many years, suffered from a prolonged crisis. It may also provide a reasonable explanation for JHS students' alarmingly low levels of motivation to learn English (MEXT, 2011d).

2.6.2 Private junior high schools

In the private JHS network, we can see a slightly more positive reality. As of 2010, 7% of all JHS in Japan (only 758) were private institutions. Despite their minority status, private schools have a significant impact on education in Japan and especially on English education. As Aspinall (2013: 67) points out, "the private sector is available for those dissatisfied with public provision." This especially pertains to EFL education: parents who want their children to develop English skills are likely to consider private institutions because of their generally superior approach to EFL education, which remains a highly marketable area of education in Japan. Of course, this is if parents can afford to enroll their kids in private schools. Not counting the few international schools, schools for immigrants and schools for special needs students, private JHS schools are, like public JHS, considered Article 1 institutions of learning. An Article 1 institution comes under the direct guidance of MEXT. One important difference between public JHS and private JHS is that the former care for the general public while the latter usually care for the children of the Japanese elite.

The influence of private schools on the whole system is noteworthy, largely because these institutions operate within a highly competitive environment. As such, it is often in private JHS that we see innovations and new approaches to teaching being implemented and tested. Also, as the overwhelming presence of private JHS school students in English speech, presentations and recitation contests across the nation indicates, these institutions are usually very active in EFL education, especially with regards to teaching English for communicative purposes. This tendency is likely to amplify due to a recent initiative by non-governmental institutions to extend English debate contests from the high school level to the JHS level. Of course, only a very small ― and teacher-selected ― minority of private JHS students take part in such ventures. Moreover, because victories at such contests have significant promotional value for the schools, one has to wonder if pedagogical goals are not being sacrificed in the process.

Due to the ongoing falling birthrate and faltering economy, Japanese private schools constantly need to upgrade their recruitment strategies. To do that, many focus on EFL education because of its commercial appeal. As a result, private schools often promote their own approach to communicative foreign language teaching. Many schools use catch phrases such as *Global Education* and *Learner-Oriented Education* on their promotional posters. Unlike public schools, which do not necessarily invest resources on promotion, private

schools often foreground 'evidence' of the effectiveness and uniqueness of their approaches. In addition, Aspinall (2013: 139) points out that "[t]he removal of Saturday schooling in 2002 in the state sector allowed private schools the opportunity to offer an extra day of schooling as a competitive advantage." This opportunity allows many private JHS schools to advertise revised and updated schedules to demonstrate their 'academic edge' over other schools.

Unfortunately, this highly competitive environment does not always lead to genuine pedagogical improvements aimed at benefitting all students. As pointed out earlier, EFL 'successes' boasted by private JHS involve a very small minority of students, while other students are essentially dealing with the same reality that public JHS students face. But perhaps more importantly, the intensely competitive milieu in which private JHS schools operate often leads to an increasing commodification and marketization of education. This particular process has been identified by Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) and Kubota (2011). An emphasis on education as a marketable service tends to take away from actual classroom teaching and learning. Unfortunately, it is often the students who suffer: already contributing large sums of money for their education, these students are sometimes forced to participate in promotional events aimed at recruiting new pupils so that their school can have enough students for the next school year. Furthermore, considering that private JHS face roughly the same challenges as public JHS — overly ambitious MEXT policies, insufficient classroom time and teacher training, inadequate pedagogical approaches, and little or no strategies for oversight — the overall quality of English education in both private and public JHS remains rather low.

2.6.3 Japanese JHS English classrooms

During the postwar period and until now, foreign language education became a reality for all Japanese children in the school system, transforming EFL from an elitist practice, where only a few pupils were educated in the target language, to a more egalitarian one where every student in Japan now has to study English. But for many years (until the late 1980's) Japanese EFL instructors had limited knowledge of foreign languages and limited training in language teaching methodology.

Browne & Wada (1998: 105) argue that "the vast majority of English teachers in Japan [currently] receive no formal teacher training, that only 34% [of most] teachers in our survey reported to making their own lesson plans." In addition, before the implementation

of the ― albeit controversial ― JET Programme in the mid-eighties, very few had access to native English speakers. Consequently, EFL education was effectively reduced to grammar-translation and the teaching of writing skills. Despite notable improvements since, most JHS teachers still devote a lot of classroom time to grammar-translation work and entrance exam preparation.

Most JHS classrooms ― both in public and private schools ― include approximately 40 pupils. Together, they form a 'homeroom'. Students are led by a few selected students ― usually two or three at a time ― who assist the homeroom teacher in the day-to-day running of the homeroom. This context puts a very strong emphasis on the notion of classroom-as-community, especially as students in one homeroom study most subjects with the same classmates. In private JHS school English classes, students may be streamed according to ability levels. Nevertheless, the impediments to successful foreign language learning seen in public schools often persist.

Aspinall (2013) provides a cultural perspective, and lists four characteristics of the Japanese EFL classroom which act as obstacles in the process of implementing CLT methodologies: a) the norm of deference to the authority of the teacher (i.e. student passivity), b) the emphasis on humility in social rapports (i.e. learners' reluctance to express themselves), c) the notion of the 'single correct answer', and finally d) the (supposed) Japanese emphasis on egalitarianism. As mentioned earlier, teachers who may initially be willing to improve existing practices and implement innovative teaching approach may, over time, become reluctant to challenge the status quo due to a) the inherent difficulties in implementing innovation, and b) a fear of being scrutinized by other colleagues who may feel threatened by more dynamic co-workers.

The consensus in the literature portrays most Japanese JHS English classrooms as rigid contexts unfavorable to the successful development of learners' communicative skills in the L2. While the context may be blamed for learners' low level of motivation, Aspinall (2013: 129) suggests that low motivation to learn the L2 among Japanese students may be due in part to students' and teachers' contrasting objectives. As such, most students may wish to develop the skills needed to successfully engage in L2 communication, while teachers may wish to focus on English as an academic subject in order to meet examination objectives.

Moreover, it is widely reported that the majority of JHS teachers of English not only prioritize grammar-translation exercises but conduct their classes mostly in Japanese. This reality does not reflect the general understanding of the language classroom as a unique social milieu in which learners are a) learning language, b) learning *through* language, and c) learning *about* language, all at the same time. Walsh's (2006: 3) conceptualization of the language classroom contrasts significantly from the Japanese EFL classroom: "[c]ommunication [in the language classroom] is unique because the linguistic forms used are often simultaneously the aim of a lesson and the means of achieving those aims. Meaning and message are one and the same thing." With the prominence of grammar-translation exercises and the extensive use of Japanese in JHS English classes in Japan, the unfortunate result is that the development of communicative skills in the L2 remains an elusive objective for most JHS students.

But the Japanese JHS English classroom may not be unique in that respect. Van Lier (2003) suggests that, while the language classroom has its own communicative potential and can provide learners with authentic meta-communicative purposes, it may be "a relatively inefficient environment for the methodical mastery of a language system, just as it is limited in providing opportunities for real world communication in a new language" (p.138). Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) suggest that classroom learning talk can eventually become a form of theatrical performance. By being 'placed' — i.e. forced to engage — in L2 communicative situations, young language learners may find L2 classroom talk a burden, while others might end up acting out already scripted dialogues in the target language. I believe that this kind of language classroom 'play' can undermine the legitimacy of classroom language learning from the learners' perspective. On the other hand, one cannot deny that classroom language learning also contains significant pragmatic potential.

In JHS English classrooms, teachers often regulate the way in which people interact. They also prescribe specific speech acts and distribute or interrupt turns. Students may be asked — or told — to be more quiet, speak more clearly, stop talking with classmates and focus on a particular task, etc. However, students may also exercise some control over both topics and the way people speak by requesting the teacher to repeat a sentence, clarify meaning, provide examples, and to speak more clearly. In other words, JHS English classrooms are essentially not different from any other classroom found in most countries. For Bloome et al. (2005) highlight these similarities, arguing that classroom learning "is

mostly about how to "do school", "do lesson", "do learning"" (p.52). I believe that the same can be said about JHS English classes in Japan.

However, this is not to say that the actions performed by classroom actors are entirely predetermined. While taking part in classroom activities, students and teachers "may modify, adapt, and transform those cultural practices, or they may import cultural practices from other social institutions and from other domains of cultural life" (Bloome et al., 2005: 52). Creese (2008: 231-2) echoes this view: "[m]icro-ethnography has shown that people do not just follow cultural rules but actively and non-deterministically construct what they do." This redefines the classroom context as one where the twin processes of social reproduction and change are in constant conflict. This is why studying the Japanese JHS English classroom context requires more thorough theorization.

2.6.4 Japanese junior high school EFL teachers

Teachers in Japanese public schools must first be of Japanese nationality and possess teaching certification issued by a prefectural board of education. Private schools may employ 'non-ALT' English teachers of other nationalities, but these individuals must also possess appropriate accreditation from local governments. This certification is pending on successful completion of a university bachelor degree as well as successful completion of a certification exam and/or minimum number of years of full-time employment in schools. With regards to EFL education, Aspinall (2013: 93) points out that "[t]he secondary level (JHS and SHS) is the only level of the education system in Japan where the teachers are thoroughly trained and professional in their approach to foreign language teaching".

Personally, I question the argument that JHS teachers are thoroughly trained TESOL teachers. As Browne & Wada (1998: 105) specify, English teachers in public schools usually do not receive extensive TESOL training at the university level. Also, they are rarely required to demonstrate oral English competence, although some private schools may require proof of L2 communicative ability during the hiring process. Even if minimum STEP or TOEIC scores are required, Miyazato (2009) reports that only 8.3 percent of Japanese JHS English teachers had attained the MEXT-required TOEIC score of 730, which is equivalent to a TOEFL score of 550. As Aspinall (2013) points out, this failure to meet the Government's requirement also means that the majority of Japanese JHS English teachers would not qualify for undergraduate study at most universities in the English-speaking world,

raising questions as to their ability to not only teach English but to conduct EFL classes in the target language — a new MEXT requirement for high school EFL teachers. In this regard, Miyazato (2009) also reports that only 3.9% of Japanese English teachers in public JHS conduct English classes mostly in English. Thus, the suggestion that secondary school EFL teachers are thoroughly trained foreign language teachers does not appear to be supported by evidence, nor by some of Aspinall's own statements.

Throughout their career, public school teachers of all subjects have to move from school to school within a prefecture. This forces them to face significant lifestyle and professional challenges. Aspinall (2013: 93) points out that "the fact that a teacher is required to teach during their career at a variety of different schools means they must repeatedly change their approach to the children they teach." While some private school teachers work at the same school throughout their entire career, it is undeniable that, for the most part, Japanese EFL teachers constitute a migrant workforce.

In addition, almost all teachers become homeroom teachers — i.e. fulfilling student advisory duties. This means that, in addition to being responsible for teaching a particular subject, Japanese homeroom teachers are also in charge of monitoring their homeroom students' progress in all subjects, and attend to their needs and concerns through counseling and periodical one-on-one meetings. Teachers are also responsible for informing parents about their child's progress and about the school in general. On top of that, they have to fulfill a wide range of administrative duties. Reports show that JHS teachers of all subjects devote approximately one third of their total work time to classroom teaching and teaching-related work. Two thirds are devoted to non-teaching related work. Outside the class-room, teachers are busy with club supervision, student counseling and various administrative chores. Shimahara (2002) points out that non-teaching related work is more prevalent because it is perceived as more beneficial to both the students and the entire school. Because of popular perceptions about the roles of teachers, what actually goes on in the classroom is apparently less important, thus deserving less attention.

With less importance placed on classroom teaching and more on duties outside the classroom, Japanese EFL teachers are generally less concerned with improving their teaching practice and more with their role as administrators. This is why many rely on the grammar-translation method: it requires significantly less preparation time and is a relatively straight-

forward teaching approach. Furthermore, moving from unit to unit in the textbook becomes a principal regulatory practice, and few other activities or strategies deviate from that basic pattern. With almost no time for lesson planning, some teachers simply enter the classroom and ask students where they had left off in the textbook the previous class.

2.6.5 Japanese JHS students of English

On average, Japanese JHS students in both public and private schools receive three to four hours of English classes a week. According to Aspinall (2013), a Japanese EFL learner requires approximately 2,200 hours of classroom teaching in order to use English successfully in most communicative settings and fulfill a wide range of communicative functions. With only three to four hours of English classes a week, JHS students receive only 270 hours of classroom English education in three years, or only 12% of the total amount of time needed. Despite the introduction of English classes at the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school in 2011, students still do not receive enough classroom instruction to successfully learn the language.

In short, not only are JHS students receiving insufficient classroom time in JHS — a reality exacerbated by the removal of Saturday schooling in 2002 — the type of English education they receive remains largely inadequate for the development of L2 communicative skills. While the STEP Test is not a fully comprehensive and appropriate means of measuring L2 communicative skills, the fact that the majority of the 653,871 JHS students who took the test in 2011 failed to reach Level 3 — the MEXT-prescribed level upon JHS graduation — shows that students do not benefit from enough quality EFL education. This lends strong support for the argument that the MEXT policies are overly ambitious.

Despite these disappointing figures, JHS English education remains a decisive stage in a Japanese EFL learner's progress. This is because JHS English education has a significant impact on the way Japanese pupils view the target language and culture as well as institutional language learning in general. Furthermore, because MEXT (2011c) specifies that JHS graduates should, in theory, possess sufficient ability to engage in casual communication in the L2, JHS English education deserves close attention and consideration.

However, learners' perceptions diverge significantly. A study conducted by MEXT in 2011 (MEXT, 2011d) revealed that JHS students hold conflicting views towards foreign

language learning (i.e. English education). A large majority of students (85%) expressed the belief that English is an important language for them to study, and 70% of the 3,225 JHS students surveyed expressed agreement with the notion that knowledge of English will improve their chances to secure employment in the future. The understanding here is that students seem to be quite aware of the gate-keeping aspect of English education in Japan.

Conversely, a study by Kubota (2011) points out that the link between knowledge of English, career advancement and the economic development of a nation is tenuous and has yet to be determined empirically. In her interviews of Japanese employees working in the manufacturing, sales and healthcare industry, Kubota reveals that knowledge of English in fact plays a minimal role in the day-to-day work of Japanese workers. She suggests that the EFL industry, operating largely on language testing, creates a demand for English education not because it is actually needed in the workplace, but because it represents a measure of people's efforts to learn. This argument is also made by Seargeant (2009) who holds that the 'true object' of motivation to learn English in Japan is "an engagement with the processes represented by English language learning — and by the status and meaning that the language has in contemporary Japan" (p.131). Aspinall (2013: ix) is more critical: "English is taught in Japan in the same way that Latin has been taught in European countries for centuries, as a dead language which provides a mechanism for sorting out those with certain intellectual skills."

In sum, JHS students' perspectives towards EFL learning, as reported in the MEXT study of 2011, reflect an ideological perspective towards English which appears prevalent in Japan (Seargeant, 2009). It is not, however, based on the actual need for English in the Japanese job market. Oddly, while a large number of JHS students agree with the view that developing sufficient communication skills in English can improve their chances for a future career, only 11% of the students surveyed by MEXT stated that they want to find a job necessitating knowledge of English, and 43% of them explicitly stated that they do not want to have a job which necessitates English skills. Two interpretations are possible: a) students are not fully aware of the importance of English education and the role of English in their lives, and b) Japanese companies require certifications of English ability — as determined by proficiency testing — not because of an actual need for English ability but as a way to sort out those who are more 'studious'.

Perhaps more relevant, especially with regard to learner motivation, is data revealing a widespread belief amongst JHS students that the mastery of English is far beyond their reach. Aspinall (2013: 122) opines that "JHS [students] are never allowed to 'have a go' at making an answer to a question when they do not have all the exact words at their fingertips. They are taught to remain silent until they have the one 'correct answer' in their heads, and then to verbalize the answer." While I disagree to some extent with this assessment, I concede that an overemphasis on grammar-translation can solidify the notion of the 'one correct answer' amongst JHS students. It is also worth considering that those who do possess sufficient L2 communicative skills while in JHS do not always exhibit their full ability in the classroom. For them, intermediate or advanced English abilities can potentially amplify an undesirable sense of being 'foreign'.

Having outlined the stratified approach from a theoretical perspective, and discussed various issues pertaining to the Japanese JHS context, JHS English classrooms, and about JHS teachers and students, I now move back to issues of theory and methodology which pertain to the inquiry into ideological discourse and educational practice.

3. The stratified approach and linguistic ethnography.

Studying the potential links between ideological discourse — *nihonjinron, kokusaika, ibunkakan kyouiku*, native-speakerism (Houghton & Rivers, 2013) or otherwise — and EFL education in Japan has so far been conducted mostly through analysis of written texts (e.g. MEXT policy documents, textbooks, news clips, etc.). But as argued earlier, one cannot simply locate ideology in the surface features of text, nor can one avoid researching agentive processes and make assumptions about a) the intentions behind the production of such text, or b) localized and situated practices.

From a methodological standpoint, I recommend the adoption of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in line with linguistic ethnography (LE), a strategy which I believe offers a unique view into agentive processes and the relationship between discourse and social practice. I invite the reader to refer to Bouchard (2012), where I discuss CDA extensively. In this article, I concentrate specifically on LE.

LE is a combination of linguistic study, which is a more formal approach to studying language and patterns of communication, and ethnography, which focuses on rather small

social groups through participant observation and other more or less unstructured and adaptable research methods (Hammersley, 2007). This combination is valuable because linguistic research 'grounds' ethnography while ethnography enriches linguistic research. Wetherell (2007: 661) also distinguishes linguistics from ethnography: "linguistics takes language as its object while ethnography, of course, privileges culture." Rampton (2007: 595) argues that "the combination of ethnography, linguistics and discourse analysis is particularly well-suited to understanding the intersection of communicative practice with social and cultural process." Sealey (2007: 651) argues similarly: [k]nowledge and understanding of some aspects of language practices are available most effectively — perhaps exclusively — by ethnographic work among those who experience them." Rampton (2007: 595) mirrors this argument thus: "the combination of ethnography, linguistics and discourse analysis is particularly well-suited to understanding the intersection of communicative practice with social and cultural process." Unlike Sealey and Rampton, however, Wetherell's (2007) emphasis is on the inclusion of what she calls a 'broadly defined discursive psychology' in linguistic ethnography, a move which she argues is aimed explicitly at studying talk-in-interaction, especially as it relates to identity practices.

These definitions essentially define LE as a multi-disciplinary approach to research. As such, it is an appropriate complement to Fairclough's (1992, 2010) three-dimensional approach to CDA, the three dimensions including text, discourse practice and social practice. This is because LE moves from language to culture and back. As such, it allows the researcher to move from the minute details of language use (i.e. text) to broader social realities (i.e. discourse and social practices), which is a primary concern in Fairclough's three-dimensional approach and to the study of ideological discourse and social practice.

A central debate in linguistic ethnography pertains to the value of linguistic research in providing insight into people's identity, beliefs and subjectivity. The debate centers mostly on the type of conclusions reached from the data available in text. Wetherell's (2007: 671) response is that "[a]ll we have access to is language-in-use. We do not have access to people's mental states, only to how they describe these states moment to moment." But despite this observation, she also argues that the ethnographer's task is not to simply describe reality as it appears through the inherently 'imperfect' epistemological lens, but to theorize "about the nature of the mind at any time" (p.672). This argument unfortunately blurs the distinction between making sense of the data and making knowledge claims (Sealey, 2007:

643), for it gives the researcher the (questionable) capacity to make judgments about 'the nature of the mind' — i.e. beliefs and attitudes — simply by analyzing the surface features of text.

The debate over the kind of conclusions we can draw from text analysis is ongoing, often referring back to the Foucauldian theory of discourse and subjectivity. To me, this debate is between two opposing propositions: a) the data found in text is direct evidence of identity and social processes (therefore text is sufficient data for analysis), and b) the data found in text is only an indication of such processes (therefore other types of data is needed to formulate plausible conclusions about identity and social processes).

The first proposition — the Foucauldian poststructuralist approach — collapses structure, culture and agency into discourse. It holds that a study of social processes is essentially a study of discursive practices: what we find in discourse is sufficient data for the researcher to formulate a theory of how the individual and social realms operate. Van Praet (2006: 2) phrases this view rather explicitly: "social facts [...] are human fabrications, themselves subject to social inquiry as to their origins." Therefore, studying 'social facts' is essentially a question of determining how they are constructed in discourse.

The second proposition is in line with social realism, and sees the links between structure, culture, agency and discourse as important while acknowledging that each possesses distinct and emergent properties. In other words, an analysis of discourse alone cannot account for everything in the social world because not everything about the social world is a matter of discourse. To illustrate this point, I choose a perhaps overly dramatic example: the Second World War. While our discursive formulations of WWII are various and sometimes conflicting, the fact remains that WWII did happen at some point in our history, and that the events which took place during 1939 and 1945 possess ontological properties which exist beyond our discursive interpretations of them. In other words, there is a difference between what actually happened during WWII and what we think happened during WWII. Therefore, when studying this period of our history, it is crucial to distinguish between ontology (the reality which exist regardless of our interpretations of it) and epistemology (our interpretations of reality). Both forms of knowledge should never be conflated, nor should research prioritize one over the other. Also, in making this distinction, one then needs to study evidence from a variety of data sources through a multi-disciplinary

approach. The motivation for engaging with this type of epistemological complexity is that, by finding points of convergence between the various types of analyses employed, we can hopefully develop a richer interpretation of ontological knowledge. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, these notions are central to social realism, and I believe that the same complexity is required when analyzing any social phenomenon attracting academic interest.

In that way, a social realist-oriented stratified approach constitutes an attempt at overcoming post-structuralism's problematic conflation between social reality and discourse practice. Interestingly, while advocating a poststructuralist perspective towards linguistic ethnography, Creese (2008: 232) makes an important point about the type of evidence found in discourse: "in any encounter we give off signals revealing aspects of our identities." Here, I wish to emphasize the notion of *signals*. With this notion, I believe that Creese makes an important distinction between *signal* and *evidence* of identity work. Without evidence, further inquiry is needed to determine whether or not particular signals constitute genuine identity markers.

Reading Wetherell's (2007) paper, however, we can see indications of post-structuralism's problematic approach. On the one hand, she claims that her approach is capable of theorizing about the nature of the mind at any time. On the other hand, she conceptualizes the individual as fragmented and in constant flux. If we analyze these two propositions, a series of related questions come to mind. First, if subjectivity is constantly being constructed in the moment through discursive practices, how can it be used as a theoretical construct for analysis? In other words, how can the analyst use identity and subjectivity as part of a theoretical and methodological groundwork for research when these entities are said to be constantly shifting? Defining identity as something in constant flux, situation-based and perpetually negotiable, then using it as a fixed research construct (i.e. as if it were 'one thing') is surely inconsistent. Similar questions are also raised by Sealey (2007) in her discussion on how ethnicity tends to be conceptualized in poststructuralist research. She points out that "it isinconsistent, surely, to represent ethnicity as primarily a fluid and changing ideational resource, and then to refer to the subjects of research in terms consistent with essentialist, naturalized conceptions" (p.649). This is why I conclude that academic works adopting a poststructuralist perspective tend to overlook the complex interaction between structure, culture and agency.

Second, and more to the point, a focus on agency in social research raises a chain of questions about empirical inquiries into discourse practices:

1. Can identity — as a construct used in research — be conceptualized as possessing distinct and emergent properties that cannot be accounted for by a study of discourse?
2. Is everything about subjectivity dependent on how it is discursively constructed, or is there a 'place' where identity, subjectivity and the individual exist separately from discourse?
3. Does subjectivity dissolve when discourse ends?
4. Is the self entirely determined by social and cultural institutions?
5. Are social and cultural institutions also entirely determined by discourse?

This series of questions can be summarized by the following question: is social research only about studying discourse? Post-structuralism would lean towards the affirmative and social realism towards the negative.

As argued earlier, the main danger in failing to clarify the relationship between discourse and individual/social practices is that the data is no longer 'made sense of'. It is instead used to make knowledge claims about the social realm. At this point, we are forced to question whether or not research is used to reinforce particular ideological perspectives, an issue which I have raised in regards to Reesor's (2002) claim that the conflicting nature of the MEXT policies is intentional. To assume that there is a direct and unproblematic relationship between text, discourse and social practices is, I believe, already indicative of a particular ideological stance. To avoid this problem, Maybin & Tusting (2011: 12) specify that

> [r]esearchers need to think through the complexities of these relationships, and the mechanisms by means of which these different levels of reality can influence one another. The underlying understanding of how reality works and how we can know about it, that is, the ontological and epistemological framings of the research, shape how these relationships and mechanisms are understood.

While I criticize Wetherell's (2007) approach, I also believe that the author is right in indicating the possibility that social and individual identities possess distinct and emergent properties, arguing that "[i]t must be the case, for example, that inner voices or conversations held inside the head, privately, with oneself as sole auditor, are a very different kind of discursive practice than, say, accounts of self in job interviews or even in psychotherapy" (p. 674–5).   But then, she falls back to a poststructuralist paradigm in her categorical rejection of the "separation of the personal from the cultural or the social from the psychological" (p. 675).   In other words, the reason why her approach to social research is inconsistent is because the poststructuralist prioritization of discourse as sole source of data about social reality is itself problematic.

In contrast, Sealey (2007: 641) advocates a social realist approach to linguistic ethnography which includes "an analytical separation of structure, culture and agency, which each have distinctive properties and powers", and argues that the study of each stratum is necessary to understand how the others operate.   However, she identifies a crucial limitation to this approach, arguing that linguistic ethnography "cannot account for the pre-existing structural properties and powers which are experienced as constraints and enablements by these social actors: different kinds of research methods are needed to explore this dimension of social reality."   In other words, because linguistic ethnography is concerned principally with the 'here and now', it is inappropriate for the study of the antecedent properties of structure and culture, thus requiring a combination of research perspectives.   This provides further justification for a multi-disciplinary approach to interrogating the potential links between text, ideological discourse and Japanese EFL practices.

In sum, LE interrogates the links between language and society (Maybin & Tusting, 2011).   As Fairclough (1992, 2010) underlines, this type of interrogation contains many challenges because it attempts to link different strata of the social world by studying local interaction and drawing meaning about social processes.   Conversation analysis (CA) is certainly helpful in approaching the localized use of language.   But as Maybin & Tusting (2011: 13-14) point out, CA limits its accounts of context "solely to that which can be grounded in references made by speakers."   This is where CDA is more adequate, and where ethnography allows the researcher to draw from contextual cues to interpret how interlocutors use language to create meanings and negotiate individual and social identities.

4. A different view into the Japanese EFL system

As argued in the introduction, the Japanese EFL system has, for years, been scrutinized from a variety of angles namely because a wealth of evidence shows that institutionalized EFL education in this country does not appear to help learners become successful L2 users. While this body of evidence can hardly be overlooked, researchers — especially those adopting a critical perspective — need to broaden their theoretical and methodological outlook so that the complexity of the problems under focus is addressed more effectively. The main reason is that the Japanese EFL system is not a fixed and unified 'unit': it is highly complex and constantly shifting. As such, to explain phenomena occurring within that system involves looking at many things at once. If, on the other hand, data is specifically selected to reinforce particular epistemological perspectives, and complex relationships are left unproblematized, we run the risk of creating a body of research which gradually becomes more ideologically-charged and divorced from the reality it is aimed at studying.

Such epistemological drift becomes clear when analyzing examples of reductive analyses of the Japanese EFL context, such as that of Yoneyama (1999) stated at the beginning of this paper:

> The Japanese high school to which students are bound [...] is a stifling place. Its organisational structure is extremely formal, rigid, and auto-cratic. Not only student-teacher relationships, but relationships between teachers and between students are hierarchical. Student-teacher communication is typically teacher-centred, one-way and top-down, and the student-teacher relationship is bureaucratic, distant and impersonal. In this milieu, students largely do not expect things like understanding, respect and personal care from teachers. Paternalistic care is nothing but a myth. Students are assigned a subordinate role and expected to remain silent (p. 244).

While this type of assessment is interesting because of the author's focus on what actually happens at the ground level, closer scrutiny reveals that certain elements of agency are not discussed. From my own extensive professional experience working in Japanese JHS, I have seen many instances where students were indeed expected to remain silent

throughout entire classes, occurrences when students were dominated by controlling teachers in a variety of ways and when their opinions bore little value to the 'ongoing-ness' of classroom life. But I have also seen occurrences where the complete opposite was evident. I have seen teachers conducting classes as facilitators, and students disagreeing with teachers on a variety of points. I have seen teachers being controlling at times and facilitating at others. Furthermore, I have heard many students describe their school environments not as stifling places but as milieus in which they felt more at home and freer than in their real homes. I have heard school principals and homeroom teachers giving speeches in front of students, stressing the importance of evaluating the information taught in class and developing a critical approach to learning. Therefore, we need to take Rivers' (2011: 121) argument that, in the Japanese context, "an active socio-political struggle for control over the identity and minds of the nation's youth is being actively and aggressively fought out within the battlefield of the school classroom", and 'unpack' the theoretical and methodological groundwork which makes such argument possible. In other words, we must apply the same critical rigour to analyzing both social phenomena and the criticisms of those phenomena.

It is also crucial to connect what is happening in the Japanese EFL system with what is happening in other contexts. Slimani (2003) defines the classroom as an environment where agentive roles are constantly being negotiated in context between classroom actors. He concludes that classroom power is more evenly distributed: "lessons are 'co-productions' and 'socially-constructed events' brought to existence through the 'co-operative enterprise' [...] of both parties" (p.288). Walsh (2006: 47) argues similarly: "[t]here is evidence [...] that the more formal, ritualized interactions between teacher and learners are not as prevalent today as they were in the 1960s; today, there is far more learner-initiated communication, more equal turn-taking and less reliance on teacher-fronted and lockstep modes of learning." Interestingly, most alternative classroom models do not overlook the importance of power as an essential regulating element in the classroom. In order to explain how a more democratic distribution of power operates in actual classrooms, we need to redefine the notion of power.

Bloome et al. (2005) contrast the notion of *power-as-product*, whereby power is seen as something one either possesses or not (i.e. power as fixed), with the notion of *power-as-process*. Here, power is seen as constantly negotiated among people, in different contexts: it ceases to be a permanent reality. Instead, power shares a dialectical relationship with agency: it structures the relationship between classroom actors — influencing both individual and social

identities in the process — and is in turn determined by the way these actors produce, reproduce, resist, or challenge classroom discourse practices. This relationship is, in short, operationalized through classroom discourse practices. Therefore, studying power distribution in the classroom means — in part — focusing on how classroom actors structure and negotiate the relationships that bind them together. An appropriate way to do this is to study the distribution of turns and topics in classroom discourse. As Fairclough (1992) argues, the study of discourse is, in part, the study of power in society. But again, the study of power is not entirely encapsulated in the study of discourse. Other types of evidence beyond discourse are needed.

Bloome et al. (2005) also expand beyond the notion of *power-as-process*. They draw from Fairclough's view of hegemony as alliance building and suggest the notion of *power-as-caring relationship*: "[i]nstead of [power] as only a coercive relationship or as a set of constraining influences, power is viewed as having the potential to bring people together for mutual benefit, both with regard to social relationships and with regard to other accomplishments" (p.164-5). From this perspective, power — or the application and reproduction of power structures — is an inclusive force, part of a strategy used by both teachers and students to meet mutual objectives. Also, the *power-as-caring relationship* model emphasizes consensus building as an essential process in classroom discourse practice.

Clearly, there is a need for researchers to broaden their theoretical and methodological outlook in order to understand the full complexity of the Japanese EFL system. Greater engagement in reflexive work is a productive step in that direction. This is the focus of the next and final section.

5. Issues of reflexivity

The notion of reflexivity is, according to Maxwell (2012), Sealey (2007) and Sealey & Carter (2004) central to a social realist approach to research. Sealey (2007: 643) defines reflexivity as "awareness that the ethnographer himself or herself is a factor in the inquiry." Because the current paper (as well as the numerous works reviewed in this paper) adopts a critical perspective, this awareness is central. Thompson (2007: 9) points out that "the forms of discourse which we seek to analyse are already an interpretation, so that to undertake an analysis of discourse is to produce an interpretation of an interpretation, re-interpret a pre-interpreted domain." In adopting a critical approach to social research, Lather (1986: 65)

argues that, "[b]ecause we are not able to assume anything, we must take a serf-critical stance regarding the assumptions we incorporate into our empirical approaches." The idea is that, with greater reflexivity, problematic and reductive assumptions become increasingly difficult to make.

In their review of recent CDA studies, Rogers et al. (2005: 382) point out that "most of the analyses that dealt primarily with written texts did not include a high degree of researcher reflexivity [...] In these studies, the researchers often positioned themselves as if they were outside the texts." As the Malinowskian notion of the 'detached ethnographer' has now been largely discredited in academia, a move which has led to significant questioning of the notion of pure objectivity in research, social researchers need to engage more actively in reflexive work by clarifying their ideological perspectives into their research project. This type of insight emerges out of a realization 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). Fairclough (1992: 199) argues similarly: "one's analysis of the text is shaped and coloured by one's interpretation of its relationship to discourse processes and wider social processes."

Approaching my own epistemological stance towards the issue of ideology and its potential impact on the way EFL education is conducted in Japanese JHS, I first underline the possibility that ideology can affect practices on the ground, but the nature of this relationship may not be as linear as some critics believe it is. In that vein, Bloome et al. (2005) make the following argument which summarizes my own perspective quite well:

> [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).

To me, this position is convincing because the most important question to ask then becomes *what do people actually do with government policies and textbooks?* While ideologies embedded in text may promote skewed versions of reality for purposes of maintaining

relations of domination in society, the actual effects of ideology on practice can only be measured by looking into the production and consumption aspects of texts, both spoken and written.   After all, ideologies are essentially ideas residing in the abstract realm, and as such they possess no agentive powers.   The real danger with ideological discourse is how it may be translated into real-world actions in an uncritical fashion.

5.1 Reflexivity as instrument of reliability and validity

Because the current paper interrogates the potential links between ideology and educational practice, its agenda is not simply descriptive but transformative.   The same can be said about the academic works analyzed throughout this paper.   For that reason, this type of inquiry adheres to critical theory and operates from within a particular ideological framework.   As such, it is more in the line of what Ricoeur (1970) calls a historical science, or an interpretive approach to science which "does not aim at *the* truth, but at *a* truth that is valid" (Simms, 2003: 63).   In delimiting the scope of interpretive research, one may ask questions such as 'what kind of evidence suggests that this interpretation is plausible?' as opposed to 'what proof is there of this?'   Again, Bhaskar (1998) asks a very similar question: *what is it about reality which leads us to formulate our interpretations of it in the way we do?*

In highlighting the need for further methodological conceptualization in regards to the role of critical theory in social research, I also bring attention to issues of reliability and validity.   Defining a critical social research program devoted to the establishment of more equitable power relationships, Lather (1986) identifies a set of "self-corrective techniques that will check the credibility of our data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence" (p.16).   For her, rigorous self-awareness — or reflexivity — in empirical research is crucial at the levels of epistemology, theory and methodology.   Precisely because transformative research involves greater subjectivity, self-reflexivity needs to be more rigorous.

In essence, Lather (1986) approaches reliability and validity not necessarily as supports to interpretative conclusions but more as critical perspectives towards interpretation.   She proposes the following guidelines for ensuring greater validity and reliability in post-positivist research:

1) triangulation of data — combining multiple data sources, methods, and

        theoretical schemes, looking for points of convergence and contradiction;

2) construct validity — balancing theory with people's everyday experiences;

3) face validity — integrating participants' reactions to the tentative results;

4) catalytic validity — re-orienting the research so that participants are empowered through greater self-awareness.

But even if these four guidelines are followed, it remains crucial for researchers to remember that research in line with linguistic ethnography is not about generalizing results: it is instead about exploring the complexity of local realities. As Walsh (2006: 63) points out, "ethnographic research does not set out to extend the sample to a wider population [...] instead an in-depth analysis of the data *in situ* is produced, revisiting the data over time to allow for changes to be monitored and recorded." Taking this into account, instead of generalizing results to other contexts or to the Japanese EFL system as one unified whole, the rich interpretative research approach which I advocate in this paper becomes a model applicable to other contexts.

Conclusions

Mirroring Bhaskar's (1998) central question, I ask: *what is it about the Japanese EFL system at the JHS level which makes us formulate the kinds of interpretations we have of it?*

There is a clear and widespread consensus that the Japanese EFL system is conflicted and impractical, some even going as far as to claim that it is ideologically-driven. While I do not fully agree with the latter proposal, I believe that Gorsuch's (2000) list of eight different types of pressures faced by language teachers (see Section 2.2) goes a long way in explaining why CLT approaches have yet to be successfully implemented in most Japanese JHS. More specifically, I believe that the current overemphasis on teachers' administrative roles in JHS is the main reason why the more demanding and time-consuming CLT approaches are rarely adopted by teachers. Also, the exam-oriented educational culture, mostly perpetrated by institutions of higher education, is a significantly debilitating force at the heart of the current Japanese EFL system. However, I think that concluding emphatically that the Japanese EFL system is driven by an ideology of Japaneseness is a very problematic and complicated epistemological move, deserving extensive theorization and

research especially at the level of agency.

For teachers to mitigate the pressures of everyday work, I propose that they:

    a) develop a new understanding of classroom teaching as their principal duty;

    b) devaluate their administrative roles; and

    c) enrich their understanding of SLA and TESOL.

If such steps are taken, I am convinced that we will see a significant — and most likely successful — shift towards CLT and the development of learners' L2 communicative skills at the local level. As Aspinall (2013: 125) points out, "[a] good teacher can always create his or her own 'small culture' in the language classroom that can promote the learning of English as a spoken language as well as a written language." In other words, the success of CLT methodologies in the Japanese EFL classroom is, I believe, a matter of the teacher overcoming some of the structural and cultural constraints, and convincing the students that there is a genuine purpose in using the L2 in the classroom.

Personally, I find the 'ideology' argument largely unconvincing because the study of ideology in relation to social practices involves a complex set of theories and methodologies about the ways in which human beings interact with the world, and such groundwork is unfortunately almost always lacking. In contemporary research, the study of ideology in relation to foreign language education has attracted increasing attention in recent years. However, more theoretical work is needed to improve this particular area. As Rampton (2007: 594) proposes, "theory is a resource for problem-solving." Moreover, theory should lead towards greater conceptualization and utilization of methodologies of research. Along those lines, Malešević (2002) suggests that,

> [i]n order to rehabilitate the theory and concept of ideology one needs to do three things: (1) to move the theory of ideology from structure-centred approaches towards more agency-centred approaches; (2) to shift the emphasis from the function to the form and content of ideology and in this way to develop better research tools for the analysis of ideology; and (3) to apply these research tools to the study of the different articulations of

> ideology, among which the most important is the distinction between normative (official) and operative ideology (that is, ideology as an institutionalised narrative) (p.100).

To guide such work, I suggest that the study of ideology should be less concerned with proving or disproving the veracity of ideological tenets and more with the links between text, discourse practice and social practice. Slater (2003: 276) suggests how this can apply to the Japanese EFL context: "the only way to understand fully Japan's version [of cultural nationalism] is to lay out the form and function, rather than adjudicate truth and falsity."

Moreover, critical analyses must also go beyond the common argument that the way in which ideological discourse can be overcome is by teaching students to become aware of the ideologies (said to be) permeating text. As Rampton (2003) argues, critical analysis should not limit itself to making arguments for critical pedagogy, even if these serve a very important purpose. Instead, "we need to be realistic about the labour, time, reading and experience involved in any serious attempt to use ethnography to theorise these wider processes" (p.5). This focus on theoretical and methodological issues reveals that links between local and broader and more abstract processes are complex. And as I have reiterated throughout this paper, a social realist-oriented stratified approach is well-suited for this type of investigation.

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