**‘It may not just be the fault of the government or the institution’: Exposing the Maladies of Neoliberalism by Examining the Political Inner-Workings of Two Japanese University English Programs**

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**Abstract:**

*In this paper, I compare the way neoliberalism infiltrates two Japanese university English programs. The first situation concerns a liberal arts faculty at a private university experiencing poor enrolment and financial difficulty. To attract students, it undertakes a new initiative to deliver faculty courses in English instead of Japanese. The administration’s actions and rhetoric betray an entrepreneurial philosophy that naturalizes credentializing and quasi-marketplace modes of education (Hyslop-Margison & Thayer, 2009). Such rhetoric sustains cynical attitudes towards sound pedagogy and conscionable education practices, with debilitating effects on teacher professionalism. The second concerns an established university seeking to be more up-to-date with current understandings of language, e.g. language as situated social practice, language and meaning as derivatives of interaction, negotiation and　polycentric material activity (Pennycook, 2010; Williams, 2010). With such a bold step, this university aims to reinvigorate its English program through more dynamic and socially grounded understandings of language. The administration’s eagerness for renewal is not shared by the incumbent English teachers who demonstrate unwillingness to change from entrenched practices inhering closely to traditional TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), a heavily commodified and marketized form of English teaching, which according to critical applied linguists is seriously vulnerable to the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies. At first instance, the teachers’ rebuff of the new initiatives are traced to uncritical views that market driven practices like standardized testing or packaged curricula based on commercially produced textbooks, are normal and ideologically neutral. Upon deeper scrutiny, such reluctance to change is linked subsequently to self-interest and self-preservation. The paper concludes with an exploration of possibilities for reimagining and reconfiguring similar situations.*

 Keywords: Academic Literacies, Critical Literacies, Critical Pedagogy

**Introduction**

The influence of neoliberalism on university English programs is a complex matter that calls for nuanced critical analyses. In Japan and elsewhere, the complexities do not lend themselves to being typified simply by situations where the ‘evils’ of market forces are seen to weigh down heavily on the work of well-meaning teachers, forcing them to conform to larger and more powerful neoliberal agendas. Bearing in mind that the issues involved are characteristically imbued with nuance and contextual subtlety, I set out in this paper to compare and critique particular(ized) ways in which the influence of ideologies and practices associated with neoliberalism can be observed in two Japanese university English language (EL) programs. Set in two different institutions located in the greater Tokyo area where I have worked as an English teacher, I will critically examine the surreptitiously contrasting ways in which the deleterious effects of neoliberalism can infiltrate university EL programs in relation to recent developments in Japanese cultural politics.

**Internationalization and the Question of Openness and Closedness**

My discussion will draw on the dialectic of openness and closedness and its application to education in terms of the way knowledge and meaning are conceptualized and articulated (Peters & Britez, 2008; Roberts, 2009; Peters & Roberts, 2012), with the aim of critically examining: (1) different enactments and manifestations of a rhetoric of internationalization vis-à-vis efforts by Japanese universities to portray a picture of greater responsiveness to current global developments; (2) the teaching of the English language (EL) as an assumed (but over simplistic) corollary of internationalization, alongside the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies into the EL curriculum and teaching practices.

Closely associated with ‘internationalization’ initiatives in Japan are common assertions about the importance of the English language in global communication (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). While the use of internationalization rhetoric may easily be (mis)taken for a greater openness to ‘new forms of knowledge and different ways of constructing and validating knowledge’ (Edwards & Usher, 2008, p. 100), such purported efforts towards internationalization, often accompanied by a greater emphasis of English, may in reality be quite superficial. What appears to be a greater openness to internationalization, may actually dissimulate the persistence of various forms of ideological closedness within institutional portals as well as administrator mindsets (McVeigh, 2002 & 2006; Stewart & Miyahara, 2011; Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011; Qi, 2014). Moreover, institutional rhetoric that purportedly claims openness in attitude to internationalization and new forms of knowledge and meaning making may simply serve as a mask for profit-making, motivated purely by an agenda to generate more revenue.

As part of my praxis as an educator, I will critically examine my experience of the institutional politics of the two universities, played out within the curricular and ideological domains of the EL programs I taught. It will be seen that cultural-political tensions and managerialist encroachments arising from the need to engage with issues concerning internationalization and neoliberalism can be very revealing of the pressures and ironies related to different realizations of openness and closedness.

**The Openness-Closedness Motif and Japanese Cultural-Politics**

Peters and Roberts (2012) describe a present-day world where knowledge and meaning are increasingly subject to fast-changing realities by way of increased connectivity via the worldwide web. They also capture the co-constructed nature of knowledge where people from different corners of the globe are now able to cast and recast different ways of knowing and thinking almost in real time, in ways that were once thought to be impossible. In Japan, the dialectic of openness and closedness vis-à-vis the challenges of internationalization, is a matter of national concern. Past and current developments in Japanese cultural politics and preoccupations with the preservation of Japanese cultural uniqueness (Hashimoto, 2007; Qi, 2014), often implicate and interpolate the openness-closedness dialectic.

In terms of the tensions implied by the openness and closeness dialectic, Japan as both society and polity has been known to scholars for its diligence (and vigilance) in maintaining its cultural borders. Historically, Japan went through an extended period of isolation (the *sakoku* period) during which its physical borders were fiercely guarded against the intrusion of foreign elements:

The idea of inside and outside … [took] a deep hold on the Japanese consciousness … something which has continued to the present day … The Japanese colonial empire later classified people as *naichi* (interior) (the so-called *Yamato*, “pure” Japanese) or *gaichi* (exterior subjects), the colonized peoples, *gai* being outside and *nai* being inside … [T]he general idea of the Other – those on the edge, outside the pale, forbidden, exotic, erotic, and dangerous – [began] to take a deep hold in the Japanese consciousness from this period. (Willis, 2008, p. 244)

Nearer to the present, dating back to the last world war, but reaching its peak at the time of the economic boom in the 1980’s, influential conservative forces have promoted the construction of a ‘Japanese *Volk*’ or Japanese uniqueness mind set (McVeigh, 2006, p. 225) commonly described in *nihonjinron* writing (literally ‘tenets of Japaneseness’), which is a genre of literature that promotes Japanese uniqueness as a primordial ontological attribute (Hall, 1997; Befu, 2001). Alongside the promulgation of *nihonjinron* beliefs in the superior qualities of the Japanese people (Befu, 2001) has been Japan’s almost unbroken rule by the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) over the last sixty years. LDP rule has contributed to an overall disinclination by Japanese society to readily admit or accept people or ideas from the outside (Hashimoto, 2007; Willis, 2008; Qi, 2014).

Ironically, LDP power was accorded the right of place at the start of the Cold War by none other than Japan’s Allied occupation forces anxious for a bulwark again the rising tide of communism: ‘this necessarily entailed support of the most conservative and corporatist elements in Japanese society – and, as it happened, the continued American parenting of [the] market economy’ (Dower, 1999, p. 546). The Allied occupation feted a conservative, corporatist, mercantilist, culturally ‘pure’ and strongly monolingual Japan (Hall, 1997; Dower, 1999; Caprio & Sugita, 2007; Kubota, 2011a), while laying the foundation for the present day client-patron relationship between Japan and the USA (Dower, 1999 & 2010). Meanwhile, *nihonjinron* ideology reified claims of a ‘Japanese way’ of thinking and learning attributed to racialized and culturalist constructions of the homogeneity and purity of Japanese bloodlines (Hall, 1997; Befu, 2001; McVeigh, 2002 & 2006). Rhetorical constructions of Japaneseness became closely linked to a proficiency in the Japanese language that was genetically attributed – to the exclusion of non-Japanese languages (Befu, 2001; McVeigh, 2002; Qi, 2014). Among conservative Japanese thinkers, it is still generally agreed that the Japanese language, as a badge of Japaneseness, is almost impossible for foreigners to acquire successfully (Qi, 2014).

The overall narrative of *nihonjinron* ideology continues to exert a conservative influence on matters concerning language, culture, education and internationalization, vigilantly guarding the status quo against potential disruptions from brave or presumptuous attempts to introduce fresh ideas from the outside. It will be seen in the course of the discussion that a major theme ringing through the problems faced by the universities in question can be traced around to conservative mercantilist and neoliberal ideologies that seek to protect or indemnify the status quo from changes that promote fairer and more egalitarian or inclusive values. In this connection, there is an observation from Peters and Roberts (2012) concerning the fact that in the battle ‘to preserve the past – retain … well-established cultural practices – there is never a “pure” reproduction of what has been learned from one generation to the next … [E]ven if we are closed in our attitudes, that which we preserve and transmit to others will always be … mediated’ (Peters & Roberts, 2012, p. 85).

The critical observations of University A and B will bear out the ironies and complications that come with attempts to cope with the unwieldiness of change, as well the way dominant ideologies and narratives can be challenged or frustrated by the unpredictable nature of local action.

**University A**

The first scenario is that of a startup liberal arts faculty at a family-run private university (University A) facing serious difficulties with dwindling enrolment numbers and financial (in)solvency. In an attempt to stay buoyant, University A embarks on a new initiative to have a majority of its courses in the startup faculty taught in English instead of Japanese. Bearing in mind earlier descriptions of *nihonjinron* ideology, such a step is a radically unusual one, especially for a family-run concern where conservative crony-based traditions can be stretched to the point of cultural bigotry (cf. McVeigh, 2002 & 2006; Qi, 2014).

The launching of the new faculty is accompanied by the legitimation of a strongly entrepreneurial agenda that fits into Hyslop-Margison & Thayer’s description of a ‘credentializing and … pseudo or quasi-marketplace form of education’ (2009, p. 53). As will become apparent, University A’s business agenda persists alongside the family ownership’s (and senior administrators’) cynical views about sound pedagogy. Not surprisingly, such cynicism has a deleterious effect on teacher professionalism while heavily suppressing teacher praxis, resulting in the persistence of reductionist and outmoded teaching practices.

*Finances Take Precedence*

I was employed by University A to teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) after two decades of experience as English teacher, teacher trainer and NGO officer in various locations including Thailand, Laos, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia and my native Singapore. I was assigned to teach an Academic Reading course to first year students enrolled to study psychology, anthropology, political science and other subject areas in English. To increase enrolments, the university actively advertised for students and chose to admit not only those with acceptable English proficiency levels, but also those who came with only a pre-intermediate level of English. The latter entered university with hardly enough English proficiency to understand course notes and academic papers, let alone follow lectures taught by professors from the traditional English-speaking centers. This became a very worrying challenge for the dozen or so English-speaking professors newly employed by the university as part of its initiative to make the campus appear more ‘international’.

For me, the main difficulty with a challenge of this nature was not so much the issue of having to teach these proverbially weak students, but more to do with the administrators’ naively technicized view of language teaching and indeed, education itself. Pressured by the need to have the weaker students acquire enough English to see them through first-semester Introductory Psychology, the administrators looked upon my Academic Reading course (very reductively) as a series of remedial classes tasked to deliver a regime of atomized language and vocabulary drills, rather than as a training in academic literacy for engaging intelligently with academic content. Apparently, my bosses imagined teaching to be a close resemblance of critical educator, Paulo Freire’s, description of ‘banking education’ carried out in an impoverishing anti-dialogical classroom situation: ‘[t]he depositor (i.e., teacher) makes deposits (i.e., facts and absolute facts) in the bank (i.e., the students) for future retrieval’ (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010, p. 102).

University A’s preoccupations with the financial bottom line invariably supported a very diminished (or even dismissive) view of Marginson’s (2009) concerns for the university’s role in the creation and formulation of knowledge and the democratization of society, if research was indeed the ‘most important single element in the constitution of university status’ (p. 103). Such preoccupations with money, moreover, gave rise to a wry version of ‘usefulness’ and ‘efficiency’ in that it was a ‘systems logic rather than [a] greatest good of the greatest number that [was] addressed’ (Edwards & Usher, 2008, p. 98). Given the peculiarity of University A’s circumstances, ‘systems logic’ meant that the reading classes I taught were simply there to enable students to imbibe subject content in its narrowest of senses – which was a simple and literal comprehension of subject matter, never mind intelligent critique and reflection. ‘Systems logic’ also meant that the Academic Reading course would be hamstrung by narrow and static conceptualizations of content knowledge and reading comprehension, while suppressive of teacher and student agency in the negotiation and transformation of meanings (Edwards & Usher, 2008). Learning content knowledge was not about accepting that knowledge itself was dynamic as well as contextually and discursively situated (Edwards & Usher, 2008) but about bare denotative meanings of vocabulary, definitions, memory drills and literal translation of difficult passages.

Instead of appreciating knowledge as something negotiable, socially constructed and hence subject to critical praxis (Lillis, 2003), narrow and essentialized (almost parodied) versions were commodified and packaged as saleable items for credentialization. Such a situation became reminiscent of what Hyslop-Margison and Thayer (2009) call ‘consumer driven education’, where ‘credential rather than the knowledge acquired [was] the aim’ (p. 53). Having students pass their courses and graduate quickly was more important than the process of teaching, learning and dialogue that should have gone into a proper education.

*Political Historical Dimension*

University A’s abrupt introduction of English medium courses on pain of financial insolvency was intriguing enough for scrutiny at deeper levels of epistemology. Historically speaking, the truth of the matter is that Japan possesses absolutely no track record of providing any sort of higher education in the English medium. Japanese, the overwhelmingly dominant language of education, is also a language that wields symbolic power in matters concerning Japanese identity and national(istic) sentiment (Qi, 2014). In the recent past, English was the language of Japan’s principal adversary and nemesis, America. After its unconditional surrender in August 1945, Japan as a nation underwent the trauma and ignominy of occupation by English-speaking Allied powers (Dower, 2010). History provides a tough reminder that Japan has, ‘as [its] basic law of the land a constitution originally drafted in English’, which amounted to a humiliating loss of face for the Japanese alive at the time (Dower, 2010, p. 317). Even today, some academic opinions still support the view that the Japanese have no use for English in their daily lives, let alone higher education.

The Japanese can deal with almost anything in Japanese and the majority of people do not feel the need to learn English. Do they have opportunities to use what they have learned? No. English is never used among the Japanese, while a language must be used if it is to be effectively learned. Do they learn English for long enough and intensively enough to internalize the basics of the language? Again, no. (Yano, 2011, p. 133)

Given this checkered history with English, the question that begs to be asked is that of why (on earth) a proudly Japanese institution like University A, would so readily turn to advertising itself as a university that teaches in the English medium.

*The Salability of a Commodity of Desire*

An immediate answer can be found in the salability of English, especially American-accented English, among the Japanese people (the ideology and history behind this is explained below). English’s irrelevance in Japanese daily life has not prevented it from becoming an alluring commodity of desire, alongside beliefs that it would open up a brave new world of opportunity for employment, promotion and happily enduring international friendships with English native speakers (Kubota, 2011b; Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). Japanese people are willing to pay to learn (in) English. English is a kind of forbidden-fruit, a tantalizing foreign object of desire, to be purchased for dreams of a more glamorous and fulfilling life.

As for University A’s administrators, English represented an exotic commodity to be packaged and sold to parents and students who would buy into the idea that English promised social recognition, cultural capital, high status and monetary benefit. Such a myth has been revealed by sociolinguists to have very little basis in current truth (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011; Kubota, 2011b). Kubota (2011b) reveals candidly that the realization of these supposed dreams and benefits, if unpacked ideologically, is in reality heavily dependent on other contingent factors like geographical location, gender as well as variables like employment and individual histories.

As for University A, the sudden introduction of English medium courses appeared to be part of the selling of a myth or illusion rather than the education of students for reality. In this connection, Williams (2010, p. 24) provides a timely reminder that ‘[i]n treating language as an object one is, simultaneously, dealing with the speaker of a language as a subject who is also an economic agent’ (parodied here as: ‘dealing with the learner of English as a subject who is also a commodified entity or cash cow’). Truth be told, the university might even have introduced English medium education merely as a cosmetic change. Neither could the administration, in all seriousness, have truly believed in the overall usefulness of the product they were selling for money – at least not in the Japanese context (cf. McVeigh, 2002 & 2006). More of a demonstration of shrewd business acumen, the university exploited popular discourses of globalization as opportunity (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011) to market its product, tapping on the powerful hegemonies of neoliberalism and market consumerism for its own gain.

Looking back at history, such a consumerist spin on higher education in English was actually supported by a post-war cultural-politics that affirmed Japan’s ‘image as an American client state’ (Dower, 2010, p. 317). Even among casual observers, ‘the unabated fixation of Japanese leaders on currying American goodwill cast[s] a pall of psychological as well as structural dependency over the nation’s [post-war] accomplishments’ (Dower, 2010, p. 317). With reference to the English language in particular, prominent sociolinguist Nobuyuki Honna reveals that among the Japanese, there is still a proclivity for American-accented English and an enduring desire of Japanese learners to sound (and behave) like Americans when they speak in English (Honna, 2008). Kubota (2002) similarly reveals the way English teachers from America are preferred by Japanese learners over teachers from Britain, while those from Australia are often requested to replace their Australian-accented English with American-accented English when talking to students in class.

The tendency to defer to American socio-cultural icons, in this case, American-accented English, is reminiscent of particular patterns of public behavior that date back to the Allied occupation. Back then, the Japanese public developed an admiration for General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP):

[S]cores of thousands of postcards and letters from ordinary Japanese were pouring into the U.S. occupation headquarters, addressed to MacArthur personally or his command more generally. The vast majority were positive and even effusive in tone, and more than a few were accompanied by small gifts. Japanese admirers assembled daily to see MacArthur stride out of his Tokyo headquarters at noon and walk to his limousine (he was going home for lunch and a nap). (Dower, 2010, p. 337)

In the same vein, the Japanese public became enamored of interracial romance stories between Japanese women and American men. Earnest Horberecht, a young news correspondent wrote *Tokyo Romance* which sold over two hundred thousand copies within a period of eighteen months (Dower, 2010).

University A’s administrators would, for all intents and purposes, have been counting on the enduring assumption that things perceived to be American, in this case, English, would garner an enthusiastic following among potential clientele.

**University B**

The second situation provides an interesting contrast. University B, a well-established private university where influential families sent their children, was seeking ways to be more up-to-date with its overall approach to EL teaching by encouraging its teachers to keep abreast with current understandings of language theories. This quest for re-invention of its once very traditional EL program was spearheaded by the university’s President and a handful of forward-looking professors looking to empower students with more progressive teaching approaches. This group of dynamic thinkers proposed a new campus-wide EL program that included: (1) a post-modern notion of language as situated social practice; (2) the conceptualization of language, knowledge and meaning as derivatives of performative acts and real-world interaction; as well as (3) language formation as an outcome of social collaboration and contingent praxis (Pennycook, 2007 & 2010; Wiliams, 2010). In taking this bold step, University B hoped to reinvigorate its EL program through more dynamic, innovative and socially situated understandings of language. It was also hoped that the new EL program would have a positive wash-back effect on the students’ performance in their respective subject areas, especially in their thinking and critical skills.

Unfortunately, university B’s new initiative did not proceed as smoothly as might have been hoped for. While the administration encouraged a more transformative social-practices approach to EL teaching, this new approach was not enthusiastically received by the incumbent English teachers (most from native English-speaking countries with many years in Japan) operating from a more traditional TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) mode of thinking.

*TESOL as Salable Commodity*

TESOL is a popular mainstream domain of discourse and practice that wields a powerful influence over English teaching and English teachers. Some scholars argue that TESOL represents a hegemonic force in the way it circumscribes and controls curricular beliefs and pedagogical practices, often tying English teaching down to very routinized technical concerns and simplistic positivist-behaviorist skills-based activities (Lin, 1999; Lin et al., 2005; Holliday, 2005). Other scholars, notably critical applied linguists, argue that TESOL as a modernist global enterprise is seriously vulnerable to the infiltration of homogenizing ideologies linked to market liberalism, corporate driven profit making and the reproduction of symbolically violent social asymmetries (Lin, 1999; Phillipson, 2008; Menard-Warwick, 2014; Chowdhury & Ha, 2014). Chowdhury and Ha (2014) use the metaphor of market exchange when they refer to the way a TESOL qualification functions as a commodity to be ‘purchased’ from a conferring institution that can in turn be monetized in the open market where English teaching is in high demand. In their study on market abuse and exploitation heavily implicating TESOL, Chowdhury and Ha (2014) examine ‘how international students acquire[d] the goods they purchased (i.e. a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL] qualification)’, and the way they could then capitalize on the qualification in the language teaching ‘market’ (Chowdhury & Ha, 2014, p. 211).

In the case of University B, the EL teachers’ rebuff could be traced to the tendency among TESOL practitioners to view market driven practices uncritically or at least indifferently (Lin et al., 2005), and in so doing, be in complicity with them. Such uncritical practices may stem from the mistaken belief that the use of commercialized standardized tests as well as curricula based on commercially produced textbooks and graded readers is normal, natural and ideologically neutral. Although the collusion of teachers with market driven practices happens more often because of the lack of consciousness of the dissimulated nature of market driven ideologies, it is also possible that some teachers are actively promoting such ideologies and practices for their own gain. Worldwide employment opportunities and monetary benefits await teachers willing to collude with the forces and technologies of market driven TESOL. In such cases, teachers will be strongly protective of TESOL-related conventions as part of guarding their own turf.

Any attempt to reconfigure English teaching or to steer it away from existing TESOL-related observances and practices would very likely encounter opposition from teachers preferring a TESOL-dominant status quo. The irony in University B’s situation was that the infiltration of market liberalism did not happen because of government pressure or coercion from a profit-driven, image-conscious university administration. Instead, the infiltration of market liberalism came through TESOL-dominated practices motivated by the urge to preserve the status quo, which became the obstacle to more creative and transformative understandings of EL teaching. The dilemma became one of an innovative university administration struggling against intransigence and inertia among its EL teachers. Commitment to innovation and transformation on the part of the administration became undermined by a persistence of traditional lock-step, methods-controlled, syllabus-observant, textbook-bound and drills-based approaches to English teaching. In a paradoxical reversal of roles, TESOL and its teacher-adherents made up the parochial and resistant bloc.

**Commentary in Relation to Openness and Closedness**

Few critiques of education in Japan can escape the larger overarching narrative of *nihonjinron*. To understand what is happening in both universities A and B, it must be borne in mind that the notion of ‘internationalization’ in Japan often assumes certain peculiarities in its manifestations of: (1) a tensile relationship between openness to so-called ‘foreign’ (i.e. alien or non-Japanese) ideas and a strong culturalist and nationalistic inclination to protect Japanese society from ‘outside’ influences (Befu, 2001; Hashimoto, 2007; Willis, 2008); (2) a subservient deference to Western (especially American) cultural capital while purporting to accept diversity and multiculturalism (Kubota, 2002; Dower, 1999 & 2010); (3) an equivocal appearance of being open to change that belies, in reality, a closedness to its true transformative potential (Hall, 1997; Befu, 2001; Willis, 2008; Kubota, 2011a).

*University A: Exposing Dissimulated Closedness*

It is clear from the discussion of University A that the introduction of English medium instruction did not necessarily mean a genuine openness or commitment to progressiveness and transformation. The stiflingly narrow conceptualizations of English medium higher education and the teaching of content knowledge betrayed a lack of commitment to supporting teacher and student agency in the generation of new meanings – which symptomized a form of epistemological closedness (cf. Peters & Roberts, 2012) or even a condition which Ball (2003) calls ‘fabrication’, where ‘[t]ruthfulness is not the point’ of concern (p. 224).

The administrators and the university owner were that much aware of the marketability of English; and as long as English brought in the money they so badly wanted, they were prepared to tolerate its ‘un-Japaneseness’, on that account. However, these well-heeled senior people were also hardcore conservatives. It was only in their interests to guard their privileged status, providentially accorded them by *nihonjinron* ideology. The foreign professors and English teachers became mere chattels or cogs in their quest for entrepreneurial returns. Their actions and behavior did not demonstrate their true openness to providing a good education, but a covert intent of creating a semblance or illusion of the same – all these while actually denying students the opportunity to engage with a wider expanse of meanings and realities. On its website, the university claimed that English was a means for students to engage meaningfully with unfolding international developments. This was highly specious. As a way of generating a quick buck, University A’s new program was drawn up to attract enrolments rather than to encourage openness to ‘creative knowledge-forming work’ or to uphold academic standards and integrity (Marginson, 2009, p. 103).

*University B: Closedness, but from an Unexpected Quarter*

In the case of University B, its EL program had for some time, been guided rather uncritically (and unspectacularly) by TESOL-bound practices, before the introduction of the new changes. Textbooks were routinely ordered in bulk from reputable ‘international’ (mostly US or UK-based) publishers. Student were invariably put through, semester-after-semester, a regime of extended reading that required them to read (albeit abridged) versions of ‘canonical’ but (out)dated works like *Lorna Doone*, *Persuasion*, *Jane Eyre* or *The Scarlet Letter*. These graded readers were, again, ordered en masse from the same ‘international’ publishers. There was also a tendency to use standardized commercially generated tests to measure student proficiency levels. The overall effect was that EL teaching became mired in routinized, un-reflexive, parochial confines. The publishers and their energetic sales people were, on their part, more than happy with such a state of affairs.

To be sure, until the dynamic new proposals by the President and the enlightened professors took effect, University B’s old program was no different from other TESOL-bound EL programs at other Japanese universities. English teaching was left derelict in an unprogressive state, almost in service to an inert state of closedness to new ideas. Stewart and Miyahara (2011) describe a case of the way English programs might even be ostracized by mainstream Japanese faculty, and left in the hands of non-Japanese (predominantly white) English teachers. EL teaching may also be left or relegated to commercialized formulaic practices as long as it does not interfere with the inner sanctum of *nihonjinron* sponsored conservatism. Long staying foreigners, to their credit, learn quickly enough to exploit the loopholes in various *nihonjinron* inspired prejudices to maneuver their Othered status to their own advantage.

Left for a long time to their own devices, foreign EL teachers are liable to settle comfortably into their Othered, if ostracized, status. Within this Othered status, foreign teachers are typically ‘free’ to follow their own pursuits in a characteristically ‘devolved environment’ or a space-warp, where their Japanese employers keep their distance through a curiously inscrutable style of ‘hands-off, self-regulating regulation’ (cf. Ball, 2003, p. 217). Foreign teachers are, in this sense, ‘free’ to operate insofar as being ‘free’ also means being Othered as part of the same package. Rivers (2013) argues that such ghettoizing arrangements can assume a racist dimension where (especially white) foreign teachers are concentrated in their own space on university campuses. Japanese faculty members, in their reserved manner, often prefer to have little to do with foreign teachers (Stewart & Miyahara, 2011).

Given the above intricacies, it is therefore highly possible that Japanese universities quietly permit a popularist-consumerist marketized model of TESOL English teaching to create an illusion of openness to internationalization. For such universities, the main concern is that the foreign teachers work compliantly and contentedly, never mind if their modus operandi is uncritical, commercialized or consumerist as the case may be. Thus, while commercialized textbooks and CD Roms generate their own demand for more and more of the same merchandise, English teaching is, deliberately or as the case may be, left commodified, methods-controlled, syllabus-observant, textbook-bound and drills-based or otherwise formulaic and un-reflexive. The Japanese system is capable of concealing its closedness to English by demonstrating a false openness to English medium instruction for the money it brings (University A), or by permitting the predictable, hackneyed, commodified and marketized ways of TESOL to operate in its own backyard (University B [and other universities] *before* the enlightened changes came about). English teachers used to being left alone (University B) are likely to feel insecure if they are presented with new ideas, because it means being challenged with something unfamiliar.

Somehow, neoliberalism and mercantilism happily allow the system to hide and dissimulate its closedness to (and disownership of) aspects of English that it prefers to hold at arm’s length, by leaving EL teaching to the uncritical, greedy and boisterous forces of the market.

**Reimagining and Reconfiguring for Change**

The task of reimagining and reconfiguring the current state of affairs is a difficult one. For starters, considering its pervasiveness, it is hard to imagine a university system that can hold itself aloof of *nihonjinron*’s self-indulgence and its readiness to subject a foreign commodity like English to the whims of the market. Bearing in mind the university’s role as a creator and interpreter of knowledge (Marginson, 2009), one can only wonder how this high calling can remain untarnished by such (*nihonjinron*) beliefs as that of the Japanese people being ‘born with a special quality of brain that makes them want to suppress their individual selves’ (van Wolferen, 1993, p. 347) or by specious invocations of ‘science’ claiming that ‘medicine manufactured by foreign firms must undergo special tests before being allowed into Japan because of the different construction of Japanese bodies’ (van Wolferen, 1993, p. 347).

The challenge in both of the above examples touches on the intriguing matter of Japanese conceptualizations of Self and Other. The work of reimagining the boundedness of Self and Other is deeply epistemological in nature, involving struggles against *nihonjinron*, especially in the way it hamstrings more imaginative and inclusive conceptualizations of non-Japanese humanity. Speaking about the importance of authenticity, choice and human dignity in Freirean critical pedagogy, Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010, p. 125) note that even ‘oppressors live in shame whether they realize and admit it or not’ when they ‘impede the actions, dignity, and authenticity’ of other human beings. Where the market forces of neoliberalism come into the equation is where they are used as a mask or bait for *ninhonjinron* sponsored forms of boundedness, disownership, Othering or even silencing, inasmuch as oppressive discourses like *nihonjinron* stifle reflexivity and human conscientization (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). The ultimate victims of such manipulative ideologies must be the students and their parents who would, otherwise, benefit from more decent values like openness in education (Peters & Robters, 2012), a healthy acceptance of diversity and the overall broadmindedness that comes with more humanizing values.

In the case of University A, hope for such a recovery of openness and dignity would involve a reflexive turn on matters concerning the university’s calling as a place for research and education (Margison, 2009) rather than as a money-making clearing house, not to mention the vital question of marketplace ethics for education providers. The way English is marketed as a desirable foreign commodity and sold to its targeted clientele is, for all intents and purposes, a cunning exploitation of *nihonjinron* inspired forms of insularity and cultural boundedness. Education, it must be realized, is ‘an ontological vocation’ rather than a technical or profit-making one (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010, p. 49).

The situation in University B calls for serious deliberations over whether it is willing for its transformative and progressive proposals for EL teaching to play second fiddle to the monologism of TESOL-dominated practices. It has been observed that one of the earliest occurrences of commodification and monologism was *not* within mainstream education, but actually in TESOL (Anderson, 2005 cited in Chowdhury & Ha, 2014). Efforts to reimagine, transform or humanize the education students receive must rightly involve exposing the old wineskins of monologism, wherever it occurs. In cases like that of University B’s, the outcome of such considerations will determine whether EL teaching will get to play a constructive role in the pursuit and creation of knowledge, as opposed to being bogged down by subversions and aversions to change, on the part of the more intransigent of its EL teachers. Williams (2010, p. 160) notes that it is in the nature of meaning that it ‘must be constantly contextualized, and when this occurs across languages, the nature of reflexivity is intensified’. The fresh synergies derived from greater openness to an additional language like English on campus and ‘the discursive processes associated with comparison in the search for shared meaning’ (Williams, 2010, p. 160) can only be advantageous for students when it comes to enhancing knowledge and material cognition.

To the (large) extent that *nihonjinron* is the culprit obstructing change and segregating people and language into Japanese and non-Japanese, the bigotries and ignorance that it sustains will make it very difficult for universities to get its students to imagine more broadminded possibilities for meaning making. In situations of oppression, both oppressor and oppressed are similarly tainted (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). No one can realistically be spared the defilement of boundedness and bigotry. In this sense, any form of campus reinvention must fairly and squarely address the challenges of socio-cultural, intellectual and professional closedness. To the extent that neoliberal exploitation thrives on different forms of uncriticality, divisiveness and closedness, attempts to weaken the latter three will help to destabilize the former.

**Conclusion**

I began this discussion by saying that the influence of neoliberalism on university teaching is not just about the imposition of profit-making agendas on harried teachers under strong coercion to comply with institutional demands and market parameters. Our understanding of the ‘nature of the beast’ of neoliberal ideology where it impinges on education has entailed a detailed examination of Japan’s post-war political and cultural history, the legitimation of conservatism by the Allied forces, the establishment of corporatism and mercantilism by the LDP as well as the powerful philosophies of Japanese uniqueness embodied in *nihonjinron*. Moroever, it was revealed that *nihonjinron* was not just a nationalistic strategy but a neoliberal one as well. Anything not sanctioned or sanctified by *nihonjinron* became subject to the indignity of being bought, bartered and exploited, education programs and their teachers notwithstanding.

For the record, there was a frenzied spate of resignations from University A, a mass exodus of foreign professors and English teachers, who felt very used as cogs in the wheel of the university’s money-making machinery. I, too, took my leave for the somewhat greener pastures of University B, where the ongoing struggle against commodification, reductionism and monologism is, at the time of my writing, just beginning to take a turn for the better.

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