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メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2022-03-01 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: HOLLENBACK, Michael, HOLLENBACK, Michael メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2618">https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2618</a>

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# Exploring Orientalist discourse in ELT research in Japan

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## **Orientalism as an Ideological Discourse in Education**

To understand the current international order, colonialism must be the lens through which both modern institutions and ideological foundations are analyzed. After several hundred years of genocide and repression, mainly from a handful of western countries, the colonial project came to an end, giving political sovereignty and independence for many, but not all, colonial holdings in Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia (Young, 2016). However, even in a “post” colonial era, newly established international financial organizations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, created in the waning days of the second World War, continued the systematic economic exploitation of former colonies for the advancement of the west, under a system often labeled as neo-colonialism (Krishna, 2009). The juxtaposition of historical political domination through military force and modern economic manipulation through global capital is a common theme of *dependency theory*, which focuses on a Marxist analysis of historical materialist conditions as the source of global inequality (Young, 2016). These analyses are useful for understanding the fields of international relations and modern political economics, but in addition to a materialist analysis many Neo-Marxist and post-structuralist/post-modernist researchers have looked more closely at how ideologies and their discourses have played a role in the increasing hegemonic nature of a particular set of ideologies, which influence the social psychology of an increasingly globalized population (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1980; Ives, 2004; Pennycook, 1994).

The post-structuralist/post-modernist approaches to knowledge take an anti-positivist and social constructivist stance where ideology and discourse create a feedback loop, where these two aspects are constantly in a process of co-creation, which in turn influences the ways in which groups and individuals come to

understand and think about the world (Pennycook, 1994). As western countries benefited (and continue to benefit) from the political and economic domination of the “developing” world (Klein, 2007), western ideologies also were prioritized and eventually normalized (Pennycook, 1994). With an increasingly international finance economy under neo-liberal global capitalism, this hegemonic western ideology is now accepted as objective and has been presented as neutral and is taught and learned in schools without much critical questioning or investigation (Mayo, 2015). It is through a historical lens of colonialism, which has created the conditions for a western hegemonic ideology, that we can understand the role of the colonialist ideology of Orientalism in the basic conceptualizations of the west and the orient and its impact upon educational research and in English language teaching (ELT).

Orientalism is an ideological analytical instrument which was proposed by Palestinian literary scholar Edward Said. The idea Orientalism explores how the very concepts of the “west” and “orient” were developed during the colonial project (Said, 1978). Through these conceptualizations, Orientalism prioritizes cultural norms and artifacts that were generated in the “west” and delegitimizes those which originate from an imagined “orient”, reifying western ideas as more advanced or developed. It is through an Orientalist lens that Said investigated how the west looks at Islam and Muslim culture, whereby western cultural analysis typically denigrated Islamic art and cultural products while simultaneously elevating cultural products originating from Europe (Said, 1978). Through this conceptualization of both the “west” and “orient”, western ideas have been legitimized to the extent that they are now foundational for participation in modern society which include logical rationality, emotional objectivity, empirical positivism, and rugged individuality, among many others. In opposition, ideas and norms that are described as “non-western” such as emotionality, subjectivism, collectivism, and mutual assistance have been delegitimized to the point that they are seen as being indicative of underdevelopment or “backwards” thought (Said, 1978) with these undesirable facets commonly being ascribed to the “orient”. While all of the traits that are listed above can exist on a spectrum in any individual from any cultural background, Orientalism positions these traits into binary categories with ideas thought to be beneficial attributed to the “west” and those not seen positively linked to the “orient”.

The ideology and discourse of Orientalism not only maintains a hierarchy of concepts, with Western values positioned above those coming from the east, but also

is fundamental in the very conceptualization of a “west” and “orient” as distinct ideological models. As Said states:

without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (1978, p. 3)

As will be discussed in this paper, this hegemonic ideology of western superiority, formed through the colonial project, has major implications when discussing education and English Language Teaching, especially in an international context where “western” educators and “oriental” students interact (Motha, 2014, 2020).

Orientalism has significant relevance for issues regarding education philosophy, as global neo-liberal capitalism has further entrenched western ideas, such as those described above, into the educational foundations of developing human global capital in each country through compulsory education. While education is seen as an “absolute” good by many educational researchers and equality advocates (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2009), the historical and social context in which standardized compulsory education was created and executed is also rooted in the colonial project. Many Marxist and post-structuralist educational theorists see compulsory education being established to better inculcate a newly minted national identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and evolved to focus on economic development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is an orientation towards education which is far removed from being an avenue of meritocratic personal development towards economic progress (Apple, 2017; Giroux, 2001). While as we can see education for the benefits it can accrue onto individuals who “play the game”, education is operating as a national jobs training program, with the most “capable” students (i.e. those who best adhere to western standards reified in the classroom) being rewarded with the most exclusive occupations, and therefore, the highest salaries. Put simply, it is a method of cultural and economic reproduction for the upper classes (Apple, 2017). It is in this educational paradigm that the western values discussed earlier; rationality, objectivity, positivism, etc., can flourish and imbed themselves into neutral mental territory. Therefore, criticisms of educational planning and policy, as well as classroom pedagogy, have to be rooted in an ideological understanding of the role of colonialist as well as Orientalist ideologies and discourses, which unfortunately is rarely the case when discussing

English Language Teaching. While “othering” as a Hegelian philosophical concept and sociological analytical tool can also provide useful analysis of ideological discourses, Orientalism provides a convenient historical contextualization where the two sides of “self” and “other” (west and orient) have been established through colonialism and imperialism and are foundational before analysis of the discourses that reify those categories.

### **Colonial Discourses in English Language Teaching**

English Language Teaching (ELT) is the term that will be used to refer to the multi-billion-dollar industry and academic endeavor that has become a part of standardized education in many countries. While ELT has been normalized as a necessary aspect of “development” by many governments and is seen through an ideology of global economic competitiveness and human capital theory, this is another area in which a seemingly neutral training system continues to support western economic domination (Pennycook, 2000). ELT’s unique history as a part of British and American colonialism and imperialism makes it even more suitable for an investigation of Orientalist ideologies and discourses, as the foundational beliefs of the superiority of the English language and its culture drove the first colonial English education projects (Phillipson, 1992, 2009). Therefore, many of the antecedents of modern ELT pedagogy and methodology are rooted in the same colonial and Orientalist ideologies.

Robert Phillipson (1992, 2009) has promoted the idea of Linguistic Imperialism, which can be connected to ideas of colonialism and neo-colonialism through the spread of the teaching of English internationally. Linguistic Imperialism “is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). From this definition, Phillipson situates ELT within a historical context, with English becoming the *de facto* international language first through colonial military force, then through conditional economic incentives (1992, 2009). This includes the teaching of English in former colonies by governmental agencies such as the British Council and the American Peace Corps, who receive federal funding in the promotion of English as part of “developmental” aid, as well as the birth of many lucrative educational businesses promising linguistic training and therefore an implicit guarantee of economic advancement (Phillipson, 1992). From this analysis, we can fully understand that English did not become the international *lingua franca* through any advantageous particularities of English

language or culture, but rather through the establishment of linguistic domination through colonial institutions, educational or otherwise. However, with the discussion of the historical development of linguistic imperialism and its reflection in the current structure of the ELT industry, one could conclude that this issue could be solved through an egalitarian re-organization of the current institutions, which is the case in the promotion of modern language teaching methodologies such as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as an International Language (EIL), and the wider acceptance of World Englishes (WE) (Jenkins, 2006). Nevertheless, if one looks at how colonial discourses have embedded themselves in the basic ideological conceptualizations of English and its teaching, this reformist view of the ELT industry starts to lose its luster.

Pennycook (1994, 1998) has written extensively about how colonial discourses and their ideological relationships have influenced the foundational ideas of the academic field of applied linguistics and then trickled down into the ELT industry. This is a very similar way that Orientalism explains how the ideas of the “west” and “orient” were conceptualized through the same colonial project. As Pennycook explains:

ELT is a product of colonialism not just because it is colonialism that produced the initial conditions for the global spread of English, but because it was colonialism that produced many of the ways of thinking and behaving that are still part of Western cultures. European/Western culture not only produced colonialism but was also produced by it; ELT not only rode on the back of colonialism to the distant corners of the Empire but was also in turn produced by that voyage. (1998, p. 19)

In this way, ELT has a unique relationship with colonialism and its discourses, including Orientalism, as it had a key place in the colonial project. A discussion about the extent to which colonial ideologies, Orientalism in particular, have taken hold in the foundational conceptions of the ELT industry is therefore the basis of investigation for this paper.

Many of the discussions of inequality and social justice related to the ELT industry examine the lived experiences of both ELT teachers and students as the industry connects with larger sociological systems, such as racism (Gerald, 2020; Kubota & Lin, 2006, 2009), native speakerism (Holliday 2006; Lowe & Lawrence, 2018),

decolonization (Motha, 2014; 2020), feminism (Appleby, 2014), sexuality (Nelson, 1999; Paiz, 2019), and many other intersectional social issues. However, an exploration of the ideological foundation for many of these in an interdisciplinary manner is necessary. While some recent work uncovers native-speakerist ideology in ELT (Lowe, 2020), more work is needed with other ideological explorations, especially in specific historical contexts.

### **Orientalism in English Language Teaching in Japan**

Japan provides an interesting context, as it was never colonized by a Western country and itself was a colonizer during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and imposed its own fascistic nationalism on Korea, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other countries in East and South East Asia. However, the hegemonic ideology of Orientalism provides a central conceptual framework of the Self and Other, as the west creates itself against the contrast of a constructed “orient” (Pennycook, 1998), and this discourse could be applied to any “other” country or people outside of the west, regardless of its own colonial history. Furthermore, ELT in Japan can provide an interesting microcosm of Orientalist discourse. While Japanese pseudo-academic discussions of *nihonjinron* (study of the Japanese people) as well as western fetishization of Japanese culture both promote the idea of Japan being exceptionally unique, its rapid “modernization” during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, its own colonial project during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its international economic capability during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century provide an interesting intersection of the ideologies of the west and orient (Kubota, 1998, 2002).

Japan has been active in recruiting large groups of western teachers into ELT education at various levels since the 1980s, which has created a sizable gathering of western teachers living and working in Japan (McConnell, 2000). While many of these western teachers will live and work in Japan for a short-term period and then return to their home countries, there is a significant community of long-term residents who pursue ELT careers in Japan, including the author of this paper. It is in this context of the immigrant western teacher conducting English language teaching and research in Japan that Orientalist discourses about the superiority of western educational practices and linguistic norms can become evident. Through an Orientalist analysis, differences between western and Japanese peoples, institutions, and systems are seen not as culturally or contextually distinctive but rather as deficient, as they do not strictly adhere to western standards of acceptability. This framing of differences as deficiencies is a key aspect of Orientalism, and further

explanations of these deficiencies through cultural, religious, societal or other means cements this ideology in the observances of western researchers, both in the classroom and in their published research. Much criticism of Japanese institutions, their cultural contexts and the involved individuals are, in my opinion, rooted in an Orientalist ideology.

Susser (1998) provided the most thorough investigation of Orientalism in the Japanese context by investigating published educational, historical, and sociological texts, which showed clear examples of the ways in which Orientalist ideologies were deployed in each of these fields. However, Susser's investigation of texts was done at random, while providing needed insights into the impact of orientalist discourses in the ELT industry and other academic discourses about Japan, could be dismissed with claims of self-selection. Therefore, a more systematic investigation of published research using critical discourse analysis is needed to show how Orientalist ideologies are currently reflected in the ELT industry in Japan.

## **Method**

To investigate the prevalence of Orientalist discourses in ELT research produced in Japan, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013) was conducted on a collection of published journal articles from a professional organization based in Japan. The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) is one of the largest professional organizations of language teachers (Japan Association for Language Teaching, 2017), with the membership consisting largely of western, English-speaking university lecturers. As the majority of the members of JALT were raised and educated in western countries, and then came to Japan to teach, it is possible that they have internalized Orientalist discourses and ideologies that would be reproduced in their research on English language teaching.

*The Language Teacher* is a journal that is published bi-monthly by JALT, and usually includes several peer-reviewed educational research articles regarding issues in ELT such as Second Language Acquisition (SLA), classroom methodology, and educational pedagogy. For this study, research articles published in *The Language Teacher* between 2010 and 2019 were collected. To be included in the study the articles must have been written in English (4 articles written in Japanese were excluded), must have at least one author who is non-Japanese (37 articles written solely by Japanese authors were excluded), and must be written by those teaching in a Japanese context or whose research was conducted in Japan (15 articles written by

those who have no connection to Japan were excluded). Following these parameters, 149 articles were collected for analysis.

The articles were processed by a qualitative analysis software program (ATLAS.ti) and coded for themes that emerged through CDA that could be associated with Orientalist ideology (Fairclough, 2013). To be coded as a data point a section of the text had to meet certain requirements:

1. Statements need to generalize about larger Japanese groups of people, institutions, or systems. Statements about individuals and groups that are directly involved and described as part of a study or experiment were not included.
2. Statements need to negatively evaluate (essentialize, otherize, or stereotype) the actions, behaviors, beliefs, values, etc. of Japanese individuals, institutions, or systems. As Orientalism explicitly or implicitly places higher value on conceptualized western values over those originating from the “orient”, statements that are positive or neutral in nature were not included.

After coding, the data was analyzed for thematic grouping and then gathered together in ways that help to organize ideas and themes shared among various articles.

## **Results**

Of the 149 articles that were included for analysis, 99 articles had at least one coding that met the parameters for Orientalist discourses as stated above. As well, there were a handful of articles that stood out as they specifically discussed perceived deficiencies of systems in Japan and used largely cultural justifications as their explanation, which produced a large number of coded examples of Orientalist discourse. However, the total amount of coded data was quite large, totaling 329 coded text samples at the end of analysis. The results of the study have been organized into three predominant emerging themes that were the target of Orientalist discourses, including Japanese people, institutions and systems. These three areas provide an organizational pattern that will allow for the exploration of the various Orientalist discourses that emerged from the CDA of the selected texts.

## **Orientalist Discourses Surrounding Japanese People**

The first theme to be explored is regarding Orientalist discourses involving Japanese people as a cultural or social group. These Orientalist discourses portray the related people as deficient according to a set of values that originates in and prioritizes the “west”. As the analysis was conducted on ELT research, the majority of the discourses about people involves discussions regarding students, teachers, and educational administrators. While there were several different discourses of Orientalist ideology that emerged, the two most predominant discourses included the ideas of the communicative deficiencies and aversion to risk by Japanese people, largely contextualized in a broader cultural explanation.

### **Communicative Deficiencies**

The most common Orientalist discourse regarding Japanese people that emerged in the analysis are descriptions of the communicative deficiencies of Japanese administrators, teachers and students. While much educational research on ELT is focused on the improvement of the communicative ability of learners, the perceived failure of Japanese students to achieve communicative proficiency is a common lamentation of western educators and is often rooted in western ideologies about what successful communication should look like. This Orientalist discourse often focuses on how the pragmatic capabilities (as opposed to linguistic capabilities) of the Japanese speakers of English are deficient as they are not adequately assertive with their spoken production, are overly reliant on silence in communication, and rely on formulaic expressions rather than utilizing extemporaneous speaking.

A typical accusation of Japanese students from these Orientalist discourses is their ‘inhuman’ method of communication as exemplified by Tidmarsh (2018) who states “[Japanese students] are completely unfocused on the pragmatic needs of interaction, which includes leaving space for a partner to ask questions. Non-Japanese might well cut off pre-prepared speeches like this with questions of their own, perhaps beginning with, ‘Are you a robot?’” (p. 17) which delves into the perceived formulaic communicative style of Japanese speakers of English. Normalized western ideas of assertiveness or aggressiveness in communication and the inability of Japanese students to suit these standards are also frequently leveled as “Japanese children are seen to be lacking in the ability to positively and assertively convey their thoughts and intentions to others” (Sampson, 2010, p. 26). These denunciations are often punctuated with claims of ‘shyness’, ‘silence’, or ‘embarrassment’ when confronted with conversation, as one researcher asks: “So why were these [Japanese]

students so utterly unwilling to participate? Why did they appear stunned and embarrassed when I asked them basic conversational questions?” (Paton, 2014, p. 25) which depicts these students as fundamentally incapable of engaging in simple conversation.

As well, having communicative deficiencies of students rooted in a lack of appropriate educational approaches by teachers is a common Orientalist discourse, which will be investigated further in the discussion of Japanese institutions. At the individual and group level, claims that “[foreign] ESL teachers ... may thus be unprepared for a very different trend in Japan; many students demonstrate comprehension of complex written texts but struggle to engage in daily conversation” (Stephens, 2018, p. 68) or that “many students in Japanese educational systems do learn English at a level that satisfies the requirements of their exams, there are many students with paradoxically low [communicative] ability who never seem to improve, or even some who are repelled by English” (Morris, 2015, p. 13) are common when discussing how Japanese students lack the ‘important’ or ‘necessary’ skills of communication in favor of other areas that have been more fully developed. The devaluation of the skills that Japanese learners might acquire to a high degree in favor of more communicative approach is another Orientalist discourse of language that promotes western standards of acceptability in education.

### Risk Aversion

Another aspect of Japanese people being deficient through Orientalist discourses is the perceived inability of Japanese people to take risks in their behaviors both inside and outside the classroom. This discourse describes Japanese people as unwilling to take necessary chances that are required for advancement and development, and then blames perceived undesirable results on this type of inhibition. Tanner (2016) describes how “Japanese English-language students are often apprehensive about writing, and are mistake averse” (p. 11), which implies that this apprehension hinders their skills development. This perception of aversion to risk is again compounded with discussions of educational backwardness, which is explained by Seilhamer (2013) by saying that “ELT literature is filled with exhaustive discussions of how the instruction students typically receive in Japanese schools produces individuals so fearful of making mistakes that they are not capable of functional English communication” (p. 40), emphasizing how deficient Japanese education systems lead to deficient communicators.

A cultural aspect is also considered in descriptions of the inability of Japanese learners to take risks. Rugen (2019) explains that “Culturally speaking, it is often said that Japanese people tend to prefer avoidance conflict management strategies to maintain positive relationships with others” (p. 16), which explains how Japanese culture tends to prioritize communal harmony over individual expression. This extends into how Japanese students respond to surveys “given the Japanese cultural tendency to prefer neutral, non-committal answers” (Daulton, 2011, p. 9) further portraying Japanese people as incapable of taking strong positions. These cultural explanations for deficiencies in English are Orientalist in nature, as it assumes that being averse to risk or being open to conflict is fundamentally problematic, especially as it relates to an individuals’ ability to become a competent communicator according to western expectations.

### **Orientalist Discourses Surrounding Japanese Institutions**

The next general theme that emerged from the analysis of the texts were Orientalist discourses targeted at Japanese institutions. While again, the purpose of educational research is to improve the operation and conditions of these institutions, much of the criticism comes from unquestioned western perspectives about the selection of appropriate pedagogy and effective methodologies. Descriptions of educational institutions as hopelessly backward in their approaches to education and organizationally dysfunctional are some of the most common Orientalist discourses that emerged through the analysis.

#### **Educational Backwardness**

One of the most common instances of Orientalist discourses against Japanese institutions involved discussions about educational backwardness. The emergent theme of educational backwardness fixated on how Japanese educational institutions have stunted the improvement of English language acquisition by using ‘outdated’ methodologies, or other inappropriate approaches in the classroom. The vast majority of these are based on western perspectives on language and education that are not investigated or questioned. The most common critique is on the use of the Grammar-Translation Method of instruction, which largely deals with written production and the translation of texts between Japanese and English through the awareness of grammatical structures. This is in stark contrast to many western second language teaching methodologies which focus on communicative competence and the ability to utilize the target language for functional goals. While the post-method approach rejects the idea that there are “better” methodologies for

the learning of language (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), the idea that a communicative approach leads to better language acquisition relies on an ideological foundation of cultural expectations on the value of different linguistic skills that are rooted in the west. The description that “foreign teachers might assume that all Japanese ELLs are familiar with standard EFL teaching methodologies, such as the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. This, unfortunately, is not the case,” (Shachter, 2018, p.3) depicts a gap between a perceived capable west and an incapable Japan through their educational approach. As well, the supposed rejection of the communicative approach by Japanese teachers and students is also rebuffed as western teachers explain the Japanese objections to communicative methodologies as being an argument based on the Japanese perception that “these [communicative] classes are seen as ‘fun,’ ‘non-challenging classes’ with colleagues who ‘play games,’ ‘jump around’ and ‘act like a jack-in-the-box’” (Burden, 2011, p. 6) which portray the opinions of Japanese teachers and learners as incapable of understanding the value of the communicative approach.

Descriptions of additional methodologies that are viewed as inefficient are highlighted with “the approach to teaching English ... was based on the so-called “Audio-Lingual” method of language teaching, an ineffective and outdated approach to teaching developed in the 1950s, based on the principles of repetition, error-correction, and rote memorization” (Browne, 2012, p. 18) as being unacceptable in the language classroom. As well, a perceived over-focus on test preparation is also seen as the root of much educational failure in Japan as “for too long, Japanese education has focused on getting it right instead of getting it fluent so that students are unable to convince, debate, discuss, negotiate and interact in a wide variety of settings” (Long, 2017, p. 20). Similarly, the opinion that “planners have long lamented that whereas all English education in Japan is intended to be communicative, it has in fact become entrance exam-oriented and highly dependent on rote learning” (Fennelly, 2011, p. 20) indicates the inappropriateness of this exam-oriented education. A perception by western teachers that the “moribund practices in Japan ... contribute towards the prevailing mediocrity and the failure to take the fullest advantage of the talent that exists in Japanese universities” (Stapleton, 2011, p. 40) further portrays practices in a deficiency-minded orientation. This discourse points to an overall focus on the deficiencies of the educational institutions through their inability to adopt effective classroom practices, which coincidentally enough are to be imported from the west. While educational research seeks to find

better approaches for students to develop, the common theme in this discourse is that Japan suffers from their inability to adopt more “modern” educational practices.

### Institutional Disfunction

Similar to the discussion of institutions being underdeveloped in their approaches to ELT methodology in the classroom, a comparable theme that emerged from the analysis was on the relative dysfunction in the organization and operation of Japanese educational institutions. Much of this discourse relies on descriptions of complex bureaucratic systems within educational institutions that prevent decision making from advancing, or the overly hierarchical nature of different sections and departments of the institution that prevent it from working in an “acceptable” fashion for western ELT researchers. This juxtaposition portrays Japanese institutions as hopelessly bureaucratized as compared to a conceptualization of more horizontally oriented western institutions.

Descriptions of the hierarchical nature of Japanese institutions, focused mostly on the classroom, school, and government are rooted in ideologies of conformity and collectivism, but predominantly, the hierarchical structure of institutions is seen as an impediment towards more ‘progressive’ approaches to education and development of students. In a description about students’ inability to gain proficiency with a certain skill the reasoning is presented as “cultural attitudes may be a factor here, since in Japan the *senpai* and *kohai* (roughly mentor/senior and mentee/junior) relationship dynamic is common” (Fritz, 2016, p. 16). This reference to cultural values of hierarchical relationships creates deficient results in student ability to develop skills through the educational process. When discussing the ability of educational institutions to adapt when changes become necessary, a description that “a particularly frustrating challenge can be gatekeeping as a result of traditional university chains of command which slows the responsiveness of service providers” (Young, 2019, p. 11), which is implicit in how it portrays the inability of Japanese institutions to change in a manner that satisfies western standards. As well, general indictments of the structure of institutions is focused on as “it is Japan which is the outlier when it comes to issues such as academic accountability, the power of students’ voices and the extent of the bureaucracy” (Stapleton, 2011, p. 40). All of these depictions of Japanese institutions portray Orientalist themes as the prevalence of these institutions to be “backward” in the methodological approaches and “inaccessible” in their organization create a picture of overall deficiency of educational quality.

### **Orientalist Discourses Surrounding Japanese Systems**

The final major theme that emerged from the investigation of Orientalist discourses discusses the deficiency of Japanese systems as related to education and ELT. Generally, these discourses focused on social or cultural aspects that are seen as incompatible with the goals of the particular brand of ELT that is promoted by western educators and researchers, including conformity and collectivism. These Orientalist discourses are the most ideologically imbedded as they make generalizations and prescriptions on acceptability at the cultural level, and therefore denigrate what are labeled as ‘conformist’ or ‘collectivist’ societies in favor of more ‘individualist’ societies. These ideas especially are foundational for colonialist ideologies that have become embedded in neutral epistemological territory.

#### **Conformity and Collectivism**

Orientalist discourses that depict ‘oriental’ peoples as collectivistic and overly focused on conformity and group harmony are quite common in cultural studies (Hofstede, 1984). This is no different in ELT research in Japan which depicts Japanese society and culture, as reflected in the practices of students and teachers in the classroom, in similar detrimental descriptions. This goes as far as to describe that “[Japanese] students in a society adhering to conformity, not surprisingly, often feel a sense of discomfort being put into a much more power-balanced environment” (Stroud, 2013, p. 22) which portrays Japanese students as being fundamentally incapable of participation in perceived equitable conditions. This ‘inappropriate’ amount of conformity is also reflected back in perceptions of the ability of Japanese students to perform in overseas contexts as they need to adopt western cultural practices when “planning to visit countries where the squeaky wheel gets the grease, where complaining is more common, or where standing up for oneself is more necessary” (Bray, 2010, p. 15) depicting again how Japanese students would have discomfort when needing to assert their individuality.

Some of the discussion surrounding the discourse of conformity also includes ideas about the isolation, often described as self-imposed, of Japan from the rest of the world. Japan is sometimes described as “an island nation with few chances for young learners to experience English on a daily basis” (Leis, 2015, p. 3). This implicitly depicts Japan as a place that is removed from the rest of the world, and while the observation that English is rarely used in society is true (relative to countries where English is an official or de facto spoken language), the description of ‘an island

nation' makes this incompatibility a foundational aspect of the society and culture. As well, the need of Japan to be a place where young learners experience English on a daily basis is apparently an unquestioned ideal that should be worked towards by educators in the country. This national isolation is not just referenced as geographic in nature, but also described as a mental segregation, as "young people [are] seeming far more content to restrict themselves to domestic interactions than their counterparts in some similar EFL contexts" (Seilhamer, 2013, p. 41) which represents Japanese learners as uniquely uninterested in their desire to interact in a global context. Latent nationalism in Japanese culture is also discussed as "criticism of the failure of most Japanese to reach a competent level of English is the mind-set or attitude towards a foreign tongue, particularly in terms of a threat to national identity" (Burton, 2011, p. 32). The description of Japan as a place that exists outside of the 'global' community is a common Orientalist discourse that is evoked in the analyzed research. An isolated and conformist country as an explanation for the lack of proficiency in the English language is decidedly Orientalist in nature and uses many western ideological norms as the 'objective' basis of comparison.

The examples quoted above are a sample of the more explicit Orientalist discourses that were identified through the analysis of the published ELT research in Japan. There were many more coded passages that were more implicit or referential in the juxtaposition of a deficient 'orient', as connected to Japanese people, institutions, and systems, to a more advanced 'west'. While this Orientalist ideology can be either openly or covertly stated with the text of published research, much of the explanatory reasons for perceived deficiencies in the above examples are rooted in a sense that due to Japan's inability to adequately 'modernize', their ELT education and the resulting abilities of their students suffer as a consequence. These western ideas about what communication should look like for an individual, how a language classroom should teach students, or how a society should interact with its members, are all unquestioned beliefs that prioritize a perspective that might not suit the Japanese context. While observations at the scale of individual research projects or experiences are valid, evaluating the situation for adequacy or appropriateness must be done with an explicit statement of the ideological foundations that these assessments are made. Above all, recommendations towards individual behavior, institutional operation, or societal outlook, should only be offered after ELT researchers and educators come to grips with the ideologies that they have been socialized into.

## Limitations

A clear limitation of this research is the exclusion of Japanese researchers from the analysis. While this paper focused on how western researchers view the educational and social context of Japan, another valuable perspective would be from Japanese researchers themselves. Many adherents to Orientalism as an analytical instrument describe how Orientalist discourses have become hegemonic in ‘westernized’ countries, even outside of the west, which leads towards internalized oppression and deficiency-oriented approaches to society (Lee, Han & McKerrow, 2010), which could be attributed to a Marxist idea of ‘false-consciousness’. A further exploration of the acceptance or rejection of Orientalist discourses from those who were not educated or trained in the west would provide an insightful comparison. Anecdotally, those Japanese ELT educators and researchers that have been trained in ELT methodology often come to similar Orientalist deficiency-minded portrayals of Japanese students and institutions.

A further limitation is that the CDA coding was done by a single researcher, and not confirmed or questioned by another researcher. An additional researcher to confirm the coding of the texts would provide for a better exploration and confirmation of the emergent discourses from the selected texts. While the nature of qualitative textual analysis is interpretive and open to the bias of the researcher, and the very prioritization of positivistic analysis is yet another ideological framing that needs to be questioned, a purely qualitative approach through critical discourse analysis of texts provides a thorough investigation of the relevant data. However, further research on similar issues is best done collaboratively with those who also can provide a critical lens through which to identify embedded ideology within the text.

Finally, as I reviewed this paper before submission, I was made aware that (despite my tendencies towards radicalism) this is largely another paper by and for ‘western’ educators. While the purpose of this research is to subvert western ideologies and provide a criticism of how they have negatively influenced the field of ELT, it must be said that the majority of ELT practitioners in the Japanese context, as well as globally, do not have a western perspective. While this paper continues the practice of centering the research of western practitioners and explores their embedded ideologies, and will most likely be read by a group of predominantly western academics, I was reminded that actual progress away from these harmful ideologies will necessitate the de-colonization of academia and ELT. Using the language of

studies of Othering, it will necessitate a complete re-constitution of the “self” and “other”.

## **Conclusion**

This exploration of Orientalist discourse within ELT research in Japan has shown that many of the stereotypes that originated during the colonial project are still rooted in the educational ideologies of western ELT researchers in Japan. Orientalist discourses are prevalent in the discussions surrounding Japanese social systems, educational institutions and related people which continue to perpetuate ideologies of linguistic imperialism and western superiority. However, the purpose of this paper is not to shame any of the cited authors or accuse them of bigoted thinking or beliefs, though I expect that reactionary readers will accuse this paper of ‘cancel culture’ or a refutation of ‘common sense’ ELT practices. However, as western ELT educators and researchers work in a field with a unique history of and connection to colonization and imperialism, it is necessary to explore some of the fundamental ideologies that are embedded in the ELT industry, including Orientalism, which shape our basic beliefs and influence our perspectives on education, teaching, and students, especially in an ‘oriental’ context. While there is much room for improvement in many educational contexts, including Japan, the basis of critique and reform must be first questioned to understand the foundational ideas which form our positions on educational success and failure. Unfortunately, hegemonic western ideology is rarely questioned, much less criticized, before it is applied as a universal solution in contextually different and distinct educational settings.

To move beyond Orientalist ideologies in the ELT industry, educators need to allow for a wider variety of acceptability in their classrooms and context. This extends from basic linguistic precepts like variable pronunciation of English sounds (Ramjattan, 2019) or inclusion of more varieties of World Englishes in ELT materials (Matsuda, 2003) to wider ideologies about education, including the meritocratic basis of assessment (Lim, 2013) and the role of streaming students by standardized testing (Lynch & Baker, 2005). A basic re-thinking of the role education plays in society and how ELT fits into global systems and structures should impact how educators in all fields approach their research and practices. It is only after a dissolution of Orientalist ideology that educators can approach students in an international context with a genuine sense of equity and social justice.

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### Abstract

To better understand how ideological forces influence the ways in which English Language Teaching is conceptualized and practiced, this paper takes the framework of Orientalism and applies to English Language Teaching research published by Western researchers in Japan. Orientalist themes are uncovered which essentialize Japanese peoples, institutions and systems as deficient and inferior to those originating from the west and are therefore ripe for reform along a more western approach. It is hoped that this research will help to consider the ideological approaches that researchers and practitioners take in education and educational research.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Colonialism, Post-Colonialism, English Language Teaching, Critical Discourse Analysis

