Japanese Culture Constructed by Discourses: Implications for Applied Linguistics Research and ELT

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Some of the recent applied linguistics literature on teaching writing and critical thinking to ESL students has presented pedagogical arguments by drawing on cultural differences between ESL students and the target academic community. In these arguments, authors tend to create a cultural dichotomy between the East and the West, constructing fixed, apolitical, and essentialized cultural representations such as groupism, harmony, and deemphasis on critical thinking and self-expression to depict Japanese culture. This article takes Japanese culture as an example and attempts to critique these taken-for-granted cultural labels. The article argues (a) that the essentialized cultural labels found in the applied linguistics literature parallel the constructed Other in colonial discourse; (b) that cultural uniqueness is also appropriated by the Other itself as seen in the discourse of *nihonjinron* (theories on the Japanese), which represents cultural nationalism and a struggle for power against Westernization; and (c) that emerging research is generating new knowledge on educational practices in Japanese schools and a new understanding of concepts in cultural contexts, challenging the essentialized notion of Japanese culture. Finally, this article offers another way of understanding cultural differences from a perspective of critical multiculturalism and presents a perspective of critical literacy that supports both cultural pluralism and critical acquisition of the dominant language for social transformation.

> *Language (in Japan) "is viewed less as a tool for self-expression than as a medium for expressing group solidarity and shared social purpose" (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989, p. 189). . . . Language teaching encourages children to express what is socially shared rather than what is individual and personal. Choral recitation and memorization are pedagogical techniques for accomplishing this.* (Carson, 1992, pp. 41–42)

> *When I was in the third grade in Japan, I wrote a description for my journal entry about how I cleaned a bathroom as a daily chore. My teacher commented, "You*

wrote so neatly and carefully. Next time, I want you to write your own feelings too. I want you to write not just what you did but how you felt." Since then, I tried to include how I feel and what I think in my writing.

When I was in the ninth grade, my homeroom teacher told us that we should not always be concerned about being loved by everyone. He said, "As a young energetic person, one sometimes has to stand for justice at the expense of being hated by others. You need to worry about being cared for only when you become so old that you cannot take care of yourself." (the author, a native Japanese woman who received a public school education in Japan)

Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. (Foucault, 1980, p. 118)

Over the last several decades, one of the research and pedagogical interests in TESOL has been the topic of cultural characteristics that students with non-English backgrounds bring to ESL classrooms. Dating back to the 1960s, this topic has been explored in research in such areas as contrastive rhetoric (see Connor, 1996; Kaplan, 1966). Some recent studies on L2 writing and critical thinking for academic purposes have made pedagogical suggestions based on characteristics that ESL learners are assumed to have acquired in their native language and culture (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Carson, 1992; Carson & Nelson, 1994; Fox, 1994; McKay, 1993; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). In these studies, authors tend to emphasize cultural differences between ESL learners' social and educational background and that of the target language community, arguing that Asian culture generally values collectivism and discourages individual self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking whereas Western culture displays the opposite characteristics. One pedagogical implication drawn from such cultural differences is to acculturate ESL students to the target discourse community through explicit teaching of the discourse conventions (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). Another implication is to respect the cultures that students bring with them and to aim at creating rhetorical pluralism in the mainstream English discourse community (McKay, 1993).

Although no one would argue against the existence of perceived cultural differences in various aspects of human experiences, defining cultural differences involves complex issues that require critical scrutiny. A rethinking of the taken-for-granted cultural differences can be informed by the perspectives of poststructuralist and postcolonial critique.

In these perspectives, a certain culture is not a monolithic, fixed, neutral, or objective category but rather a dynamic organism that exists in discursive fields in which power is exercised. Labels used for representing cultures are produced, reinforced, and contested by discourses that manifest power struggles within the culture and between cultures. This understanding of the discursive nature of the knowledge of cultural differences questions the oversimplified generalizations of language and culture that appear in the recent applied linguistics literature. Pedagogical perspectives from critical multiculturalism and literacy offer another kind of insight into culture, supporting the critical teaching of the dominant form of the language with the goal of transforming social-cultural relations of power for a more equal and pluralistic society.

This article takes Japanese culture as an example and, after summarizing the characterizations of Japanese culture that appear in the applied linguistics literature, critiques the essentialized representations of culture found in discussions of teaching writing and critical thinking to ESL students. It also attempts to come to terms with the pedagogical tension between acculturation and pluralist approaches. I first argue that the cultural dichotomy promoted in the applied linguistics literature is constructed by discourse that reflects and creates particular power relations in which the dominant group defines the subordinate group as the exotic Other. Second, I point out that the Other adopts cultural distinctiveness, manifesting a struggle for power in Westernization, as is evident in the discourse of the uniqueness of Japanese culture that has been promoted in Japan since the 1960s. Third, I present an emerging body of research on Japanese schooling as counterknowledge that is generating a new understanding of culture in Japanese education. Finally, this article discusses (a) a perspective of critical multiculturalism as a way of understanding cultural differences in educational contexts and (b) implications for L2 teaching from a view of critical literacy.

JAPANESE CULTURE IN THE APPLIED LINGUISTICS LITERATURE

A current conception about culture found in the applied linguistics literature tends to draw a rigid boundary and create a dichotomy between Western culture, particularly that of the U.S., and Japanese culture as part of East Asian culture. On the one hand, researchers often characterize Japanese culture as traditional, homogeneous, and group oriented with a strong emphasis on harmony. They argue that because group goals override individual interests, the Japanese underemphasize self-expression and creativity. On the other hand, researchers characterize U.S. culture and Western culture in general using such labels as

individualism, *self-expression*, and *critical thinking*. This conception is reflected in a strong tendency toward cultural dichotomization that has long existed in areas of inquiry such as contrastive rhetoric, in which Japanese written discourse is characterized as indirect, implicit, and inductive as opposed to English discourse, which is described as direct and deductive (for summaries of the representation of Japanese written discourse see Connor, 1996; Kubota, 1997). Recently, cultural explanations for teaching and learning academic skills in ESL have frequently appeared in the applied linguistics literature. Examples are Atkinson (1997), Ballard and Clanchy (1991), Carson (1992), Carson and Nelson (1994), Fox (1994), McKay (1993), and Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996).

The Assumption of Cultural Determinism

From the perspective of L2 literacy pedagogy, Carson (1992) proposes that the process of acquiring literacy in the L1 influences learners' approach to acquiring literacy in an L2. As an example of an aspect of the Japanese literacy acquisition process, Carson claims that schooling in Japan values group goals over individual interests. Citing authors such as Duke (1986) and Tobin, Wu, and Davidson (1989), Carson states that teamwork observed in academic and nonacademic activities, choral work in Japanese language classes in Japan, and language use that stresses empathy over self-expression in preschools reflect an emphasis on maintaining harmonious relations among members of the group. Citing Duke (1986), Carson notes that teaching methods in a Japanese language class in Japan emphasize traditional techniques such as memorization, repetition, and drilling rather than creativity and innovation. The author suggests that teachers be aware of cultural differences and expose, accommodate, or exploit these differences when appropriate.

Along the same lines, Carson and Nelson (1994), focusing on the issues of collaborative work in L2 writing, maintain that even though Asian cultures such as those of Japan and China are considered to be collectivist, writing groups may be problematic for ESL students from these cultures for two reasons. First, the goal of group work in ESL writing is individual achievement through the giving and receiving of constructive criticism, whereas collectivist cultures place importance on achieving a group goal while maintaining harmony within the group. Second, Asian students' impersonal attitudes toward out-group members as opposed to in-group members may result in hostile and competitive behavior within a writing group, which is an arbitrary out-group and may not be conducive to collaborative learning.

A similar cultural image is presented by McKay (1993). Discussing issues of ideology in teaching ESL writing, McKay suggests that L2

composition ideology can be explored by using a framework of literacy theory that views literacy as social and cultural practice. McKay, along with Land and Whitley (1989), claims that the ideological approach to literacy is to validate ESL students' native language and culture and to promote a pluralism of discourse conventions in English. As an example of cultural and intellectual traditions of writing, McKay cites Ballard and Clanchy (1991), who claim that cultures fall on a continuum from placing a value on *conserving knowledge* to placing a value on *extending knowledge*. According to this view, Asian cultures value conservation of knowledge and favor a reproductive mode of learning that stresses memorization and imitation. In contrast, many Western cultures fall between the middle of the continuum and the other end (i.e., extension of knowledge) and favor an analytic or speculative mode of learning using strategies such as critical thinking and hypothesizing.

Also in the field of teaching writing, Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) critique the recent emphasis on the notions of *audience* and *voice* in L1 composition textbooks and its implication for ESL students with different cultural backgrounds. In their critique, the authors also refer to cultural differences. They point out that L1 composition texts stress the importance of coherently making a strong argument by using critical thinking and considering the needs of one's audience. Citing scholars such as Carson (1992) and Hinds (1987), who propose that the reader (audience) rather than the writer is responsible for interpretation of Japanese texts, Ramanathan and Kaplan maintain that culturally preferred conventions of written discourse in the Japanese culture are incompatible with the assumptions underlying audience and voice. The way in which L1 composition textbooks address this emphasis is inductive and implicit, Ramanathan and Kaplan assert, making students discover conventions of writing on their own. Ramanathan and Kaplan recommend instead an approach to L2 academic writing that exposes ESL students to specific conventions in particular disciplines.

In a recent critique of teaching critical thinking to ESL students, Atkinson (1997) points to culturally specific values underlying the notion of critical thinking and claims that they are incompatible with Asian cultural values. He argues that the concept of critical thinking presupposes individualism, self-expression, and learning by using language; that not all cultures share the same values that inhere in critical thinking; and that ESL professionals need to view critical thinking as a cultural practice. Citing studies such as Clancy's (1986) on early socialization of Japanese children and Carson's (1992), discussed above, Atkinson argues that Japanese culture values group conformity and traditional learning strategies such as memorization and choral recitation while discouraging self-expression and creativity. He warns against forming a bandwagon for teaching critical thinking that may marginalize minority

students and suggests instead a *cognitive apprenticeship* approach to teaching thinking skills through modeling and coaching.

Fox (1994) also attempts to highlight facets of ESL students' cultural backgrounds that differ from U.S. cultural expectations in order to explain students' struggle to acquire the target academic discourse conventions. Quoting her students from Japan, Fox describes the Japanese written communication style with labels such as *indirectness, vagueness, politeness,* and *absence of critical thinking*. The author acknowledges two pedagogical arguments at odds: to change the university by opening it up to diverse communication styles and to change the students by providing them with the instruction necessary to meet the demands of social-cultural standards. Although she recognizes the value of the former argument, she supports the second one because students cannot wait for institutional and social change. Fox endorses strategies that include discussing cultural differences and making explicit the cultural expectations of Western academic writing, such as directness, precision, analysis, critical thinking, and originality.

These studies have made important contributions to the field of applied linguistics in that they recognize, rather than ignore, cultural differences and their importance in L2 teaching and learning. However, they have tended to dichotomize Western culture and Eastern culture and to draw rigid cultural boundaries between them. They have given labels such as *individualism, self-expression, critical and analytic thinking,* and *extending knowledge* to Western cultures on the one hand and *collectivism, harmony, indirection, memorization,* and *conserving knowledge* to Asian cultures in general on the other. The assumption underlying this approach is that there is a systematic, culturally determined way in which all members in a certain culture think, behave, and act.

The Case Against Deterministic Thinking

Still other researchers criticize these perspectives, arguing that such views promote a monolithic, static, and exoticized image of culture as well as promote deterministic thinking that regards students as rigidly bound by cultural traditions (Raimes & Zamel, 1997; Spack, 1997b; Zamel, 1997). For example, a recent longitudinal case study of one Japanese female undergraduate student (Spack, 1997a) documents her evolving personal strategies for survival and success in the academic community of higher education, thus questioning the static image of ESL students bound by their native culture. Critics such as Raimes and Zamel (1997), Spack (1997b), and Zamel (1997) have emphasized the complexity, idiosyncrasy, multiplicity, and unpredictability of L2 compo-

sition. Other critics have pointed out evidence generated by research that runs counter to stereotypes. Susser (1998), for instance, argues that EFL literature has reinforced the Othering, stereotyping, misrepresenting, and essentializing of Japanese culture and Japanese students, based on Orientalist discourse rather than on evidence from research. Also, in the field of contrastive rhetoric, recent studies have debunked cultural myths that Japanese written discourse is characterized by culturally specific features such as *reader responsibility*, *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu,* and *delayed introduction of purpose,* proposed by Hinds (1983, 1987, 1990), and that Japanese and English discourse patterns exhibit distinct differences (e.g., Kubota, 1997, 1998; McCagg, 1996). These critiques parallel a number of studies that reconceptualize cultural representations of other Asian languages (e.g., Bloch & Chi, 1995; Kachru, 1988; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Taylor & Chen, 1991).

Overall, however, criticism of the essentialization and exoticization of culture as well as determinism in cultural representations tends to emphasize the similarity between cultures, diversity within a culture, and the idiosyncratic and unpredictable nature of learning processes. Constructing criticism in this way can be problematic because such an argument is unable to escape a binary logic of same versus different, diverse versus homogeneous, and unsystematic versus systematic, which underlies the cultural dichotomization of the West versus the East. Nor can it escape the thinking that out there waiting to be discovered is a truth about culture in a positivistic sense. It is useful instead to critically understand cultural representations as particular truth or knowledge constructed by discourse. The argument here is not that cultural differences and human agency do not exist. The way people think, speak, write, and behave is certainly influenced by the culture in which they are brought up, and certain cultural differences indeed exist. Nor do I reject the notion that people as human agents have individual lived experiences and voices that may not be shared by other members of the same culture. Moreover, I do not dismiss the existence of diversity within a culture in regard to race, ethnicity, language, class, gender, age, geographical conditions, and cross-cultural influences. Although cultural similarities, diversities, and individual factors as well as cultural differences are worth exploring, instead I attempt a critique from a different perspective; namely, a critique of cultural representations from the concepts of discourse and power/knowledge.

THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF THE OTHER AS CONSTRUCTED BY DISCOURSE

Culture as Fixed and Objective

The cultural characteristics that appear in the literature reviewed above are based on the conception that a certain culture can be represented by distinctive labels that are completely different from those used to describe another culture. In this conception, perceived cultural characteristics are taken as truth. However, this knowledge can be viewed as neither true, nor scientific, nor neutral but rather as existing discursive relations in which power is circulated, exercised, and attached to a particular form of knowledge. As such, knowledge of cultural representation is political and manifests a struggle over meaning and a will to truth. An increasing volume of literature in applied linguistics research and L2 teaching substantiates this view of power and knowledge (e.g., Canagarajah, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996, Peirce, 1989, 1995; Pennycook, 1989, 1994, 1996). Such knowledge, in the writing of Foucault (1980), is organized as "regimes of truth," that is, "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true." Any regime becomes "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it" (pp. 132–133). Overall, power is transmitted, produced, and reinforced as well as diminished and thwarted by discourse, and, indeed, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault, 1978, p. 100).

As a knowledge, the cultural representation of the exotic Other thus can be seen as constructed through particular discourses that define the Other. Labels that symbolize a cultural dichotomy serve to create and perpetuate, rather than reflect, cultural differences. This construction of Otherness is part of the colonial discourse. The colonial construction of the Other and its subjectivities in the domains of culture, race, ethnicity, and gender has been discussed by many critics (e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1967; Memmi, 1967; Minh-ha, 1989; Nandy, 1983; Said, 1978; Sardar, Nandy, & Davies, 1993). Among such discussions, a feminist critique by Hartsock (1990) on the construction of woman as the Other, for instance, provides a critical view of the construction of cultural labels such as *extending knowledge* and *preserving knowledge* and on the colonialist metaphor behind such terms. By drawing on the critique of colonial discourse from Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967) and Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Hartsock claims that the White male ruling class in Enlightenment paradigms created the image of woman as a devalued Other. In the same way, the colonizer has constructed the artificial Other as being what the colonizer is not, as having negative qualities such as

backwardness, opacity, and a lack of reason, constituting a depersonalized collectivity (Memmi, 1967). Similarly, Said argues that the concept of the Orient has been constructed by European colonizers, travelers, writers, and so on as something that the West is not. The image is that we are this and they are that, creating Western authority over the Orient. Said also argues that what constitutes Orientalism is a monolithic and unchanging view of the Orient. According to this view, Indo-European languages are perceived as the living, *organic* norm, and Semitic Oriental languages are seen as comparatively *inorganic* (p. 143). Here, Memmi's description on the process of dichotomizing us versus them is suggestive:

> Once the behavioral feature or historical or geographical factor which characterizes the colonialist and contrasts him with the colonized has been isolated, this gap must be kept from being filled. . . . The colonial relationship between colonized and colonizer, founded on the essential outlook of the two protagonists, becomes a definitive category . . . and neither one nor the other will ever change. (pp. 71–72)

The dichotomy between extending knowledge and conserving knowledge expressed in the research reviewed earlier parallels the understanding of the Other as a constructed category that is detached from "us" in unequal power relations. What is significant here is the metaphor that these terms contain. The phrase *extending knowledge* implies that knowledge is always being developed and replaced by a new body of knowledge. On the contrary, the phrase *conserving knowledge* implies that knowledge that existed in the past has been and will be preserved unchanged. The corollary is that Western countries, which favor extending knowledge, keep creating new knowledge and developing, whereas Asian cultures, which favor conserving knowledge, are always behind the West. They never leave the traditional boundary and will never share the West's knowledge. In this paradigm, the Other is locked into a very rigid category of "not us" and does not evolve and change in history or transform particular power relationships.

The notion of culture in this view is a very particular one—culture is regarded as fixed, objective, homogeneous, ahistorical, and apolitical. It does not recognize the organic and plural nature of culture influenced by political and ideological forces and intricate power relations within the culture and between cultures at a certain time. A critique of colonial discourse suggests that what is defined as culture or what constitutes culture is closely related to the question of who defines it and what kind of power relations exist between those who define it and those who are defined by it.

Contradictions Among the Categories

The difficulty of creating fixed dichotomous categories such as extending knowledge versus conserving knowledge, collectivism versus individualism, and analytical thinking versus memorization becomes evident when contradicting multiple discourses and social practices in one culture at a specific time are taken into account. The notion of extending knowledge is not compatible, for example, with conservative arguments in the U.S., such as those by Hirsch (1987) and Bloom (1987), who promote instruction in traditional European-oriented literature, philosophy, and facts instead of diversified texts and voices that provide alternative views of the world.

Similarly in Japan, it has been pointed out that educational reform since the mid-1980s has prompted a shift of emphasis from logical and objective thinking skills in the post–World War II school curriculum to counterlogic and patriotic values, which is found in the promotion of appreciation rather than analysis of nature in elementary school science classes and respect for the emperor in sixth-grade social studies (Umehara, 1990).[1] Japanese language education in the current curriculum also exhibits a peculiar contradiction. Although the curriculum strongly promotes logical thinking and self-expressiveness in language in order to accommodate the national trend toward internationalization, it also includes patriotic values such as understanding of and respect for cultural traditions, love of the nation, and the Japanese identity (Umehara, 1990). Such a critique of Japan's educational reform suggests that the emphasis on analytical, logical, and critical thinking that existed as an important component in the postwar Japanese school curriculum has shifted to a focus on affective and nationalistic values with the rise of a new politics. Significantly, at the same time, self-expression is being promoted in the discourse of internationalization in which Japan perceives its position vis-à-vis Western countries.

Again in the U.S. context, another example of contradiction is the silence observed since the 1980s in some undergraduate classrooms, in which "most students, seemingly unconcerned with content, laboriously, and uncritically write down whatever teachers say. They seldom challenge either the teacher or their readings; controversy, and debate, when they arise, usually are about grading policies, and requirements" (Gimenez, 1989, p. 184). These contradictions indicate that self-expression and critical thinking may reflect not reality but rather what Americans wish to achieve. Furthermore, as Pennycook (1996) shows, concepts such

[1] The role and status of the imperial system in Japan is a politically and ideologically contentious issue because of the legacy of the emperor as a national icon during the Japanese military expansion from the late 19th century until the end of World War II.

as self-expression and individual creativity in the Western academic world become ambiguous when one notices the contradiction between an emphasis on originality and creativity on the one hand and an emphasis on conformity to the fixed canon of disciplinary knowledge on the other. Moreover, a new understanding of author that views the voice as constructed by language and discourse rather than as a manifestation of an authentic self makes it difficult to pinpoint what originality and creativity actually mean.

THE DISCOURSE APPROPRIATED BY THE OTHER: THE UNIQUENESS OF JAPANESE CULTURE

Images of the Other are constructed not only through a colonial Orientalist discourse that manifests unequal relations of power but also by the Other itself, creating *self-Orientalism* (Iwabuchi, 1994). The question of what characterizes the Japanese and Japanese culture has long been an area of inquiry among the Japanese, and the discourse of Japanese uniqueness has created cultural labels that parallel those found in the applied linguistics literature. However, since the 1980s, critics have raised questions about the commonly accepted notion of the uniqueness of Japanese culture, arguing that these characteristics of the Japanese people and culture are ideological constructs that promote homogeneity and harmony among Japanese citizens, thus serving the interests of the Japanese government and its large corporations.

Nihonjinron: Theories on the Japanese

The issue of Japanese identity and Japanese national character has become a popular topic of discussion since the Meiji Period (1868–1912), when Japan began to experience a great deal of foreign contact. More recently, *nihonjinron* (theories on the Japanese) gained popularity in 1960s and 1970s, when Japan underwent rapid economic growth accompanied by industrialization and Westernization.[2] To explain the economic success of Japan, many researchers, critics, and educators in Japan as well as in the U.S. (e.g., Doi, 1971; Kindaichi, 1975; Nakane, 1967; Reischauer, 1978; Tsunoda, 1978; Vogel, 1979) began to explore

[2] Westernization here is broadly defined as social, cultural, political, and economic change in which the West (particularly Western countries with political and economic power) is seen as the model for development. Although lumping the West into a single category is problematic, the model to emulate in this process is certainly the West in a broad sense rather than other parts of the world.

this topic, making prevalent the notion that the Japanese people and culture exhibit unique interpersonal relationships, group psychology, social behaviors, lifestyles, language use, business management, and even biological brain functions (see Minami, 1994).

In general, Japanese culture in this discourse is characterized by groupism or nonindividualism, which promotes conformity to group goals, and homogeneity, which deemphasizes diversity within the culture (Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986; Sugimoto & Mouer, 1982). Authors of *nihonjinron* have put forth the notion that the Japanese attribute more importance to the benefit of the group than to individual desire and achievement. Many authors argue that Japanese cultural distinctiveness also includes language use; they say that the Japanese prefer the nonlogical, nonverbal, and empathetic mode of communication, reflecting groupism and homogeneity, as opposed to the logical, assertive, and objective mode used by Westerners (see Yoshino, 1992).

Criticism of *Nihonjinron*

Since the 1980s, some critics have begun to critically assess *nihonjinron* from sociopolitical points of view (e.g., Befu, 1987; Dale, 1986; Iwabuchi, 1994; Kawamura, 1980; Lummis & Ikeda, 1985; Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986, 1995; Sugimoto & Mouer, 1982). They criticize the monolithic, essentialist, and reductionist view of Japanese culture promoted by *nihonjinron* and argue that, as a form of cultural nationalism (Yoshino, 1992), *nihonjinron* rescues the Japanese from an identity crisis in the midst of Westernization and works as an ideology that serves interests of political and business leaders.

Befu (1987), for example, claims that *nihonjinron* emerged from the sentiment that the Japanese had lost their traditional values and customs during the rapid postwar industrialization and Westernization. Since that time, a Western lifestyle has increasingly dominated the public space and continues to invade the private sphere, as is evident in aspects of everyday life from food to living space to clothing. The notion that the Japanese people and culture are unique works to rescue a Japanese identity threatened by Westernization, which manifests particular power relations between Japan and the West.

As for the issue of political and economic interests, critics argue that *nihonjinron* as an ideology serves the interest of dominant political and business leaders both domestically and internationally (Befu, 1987; Mouer & Sugimoto, 1986; Sugimoto & Mouer, 1982). The concepts of harmony, groupism, and homogeneity promote loyalty to the nation among citizens, and these beliefs reduce conflicts in the society. The notion of cultural uniqueness also is used as a convenient excuse to

legitimate Japan's position in the event of international political and economic conflicts. For instance, to resist international demands to open Japanese markets for construction, ski equipment, and beef, Japanese government officials have used such excuses as "The soil in Japan is unique," "The quality of snow in Japan is unique," and "The Japanese have longer intestines than Westerners (!)" (Ishizawa, 1997). The discourse of *nihonjinron* manifests the Japanese struggle to reclaim a cultural identity threatened by Westernization and to gain power in international communities.

Nihon Bunkaron and Educational Reform

Nihon bunkaron (theories of Japanese culture), which is synonymous with *nihonjinron,* has also influenced educational reform. *Nihon bunkaron* has promoted conservative values such as reverence for a supernatural being (which parallels the emperor) and love of cultural tradition, as indicated in the recent development of national curricula for elementary and secondary schools (Morita, 1988; Umehara, 1990). Indeed, international power relations explain for this trend. Economic conflicts between Japan and the West, particularly the U.S., in the 1980s created a sense among the Japanese government and large businesses that Japan needed to internationalize by becoming an equal partner of the Western nations and by teaching the world about Japanese values. Internationalization thus embraces both Westernization, which would further threaten Japanese identity, and cultural nationalism, which would preserve this identity (see Kubota, in press, for more discussion). The patriotic values promoted in the new curricula are to relieve the identity crisis of the young generation, which will be a key player in maintaining the economic prosperity of the nation (see Morita, 1988). The ideological model of *nihonjinron,* however, does not stand without criticism. It is difficult to assess the actual intention (e.g., manipulation, indoctrination) of the producers of *nihonjinron* and exactly how readers of *nihonjinron* consume this discourse (Yoshino, 1992). As Yoshino points out, different groups of people interpret *nihonjinron* and find it useful with different levels of significance.

Voice as "a Site of Struggle"

The above criticisms of *nihonjinron* indicate that group orientation, harmony, and homogeneity, which are often believed to be the central characteristics of Japanese culture, need to be reevaluated from a point of view of a discourse in which power relations construct and legitimate

such particular beliefs. The appropriation of *nihonjinron* by Japanese elites demonstrates their struggle to reclaim their identity and shift power relations. Although individuals may take different subjective positions on this discourse, the view of Japanese uniqueness as a discourse warns ESL professionals against interpreting students' authentic voices, such as the following, presented by Fox (1994), as objective truths or individual expressions divorced from social, political, and ideological dimensions:

> I used to feel guilty in Japan because I was too critical. In Japan, the teacher teaches, the students take notes. . . . As soon as you ask an interesting question, it's rude. . . . The Japanese are so eager to create harmony. You just can't break the harmony. (p. 56)

An understanding of *nihonjinron* as a discourse provides an interpretation of this voice as a manifestation of the discourse that helps shape the subjectivity of the speaker. Also, this voice raises an issue of power that enables or discourages public criticism beyond the cultural dichotomy of individualism versus collectivism. Questioning an authority, even in the West, may involve backlash, particularly when the person questioning has a certain status conferred by race, gender, or class. The notion of voice thus needs to be understood as not as expression of true cultural essence but as "a site of struggle where the subjectivity of the language-user confronts the conditions of possibility formulated between language and discourse" (Pennycook, 1994, p. 296). The voice that speaks of an essence of a particular culture needs to be deconstructed through a critical examination of the social, historical, and ideological construction of voices.

COUNTERKNOWLEDGE FROM RECENT RESEARCH ON JAPANESE EDUCATION

Previous sections examined the representations of Japanese culture as particular knowledge constructed in discursive fields. Power, however, is not unidirectional, nor is discourse monolithic. As indicated and implied, discursive fields have effects, some of which "consist of competing ways of giving meaning to the world" (Weedon, 1987, p. 35), creating and transforming different forms of knowledge and different power relations. In discursive fields, new truth emerges, becomes dominant, or is suppressed. In the field of applied linguistics, the essentialized cultural representations regarding the Japanese language as well as other Asian languages are increasingly challenged by new perspectives and empirical research. The field of educational research on schooling in Japan is also

forming new knowledge that challenges the discourse that has legitimated the essentialized cultural labels given to Japanese education.

Elementary Education

Characteristics of Japanese education described in the applied linguistics literature point significantly to less emphasis on creativity, self-expression, individualism, and critical thinking relative to U.S. education. However, many studies on schooling in Japan offer observations of the opposite. The conclusions of recent research demystify stereotypical images of Japanese education, such as mechanical learning; rote memorization; and lack of individualism, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Lee, Graham, and Stevenson (1996) state that although stereotypes may depict the noble and warrior classes that existed centuries ago, such a characterization of Japanese education is clearly out of date at least at the elementary school level. Recent educational research shows that the Japanese preschool and elementary school curriculum does promote creativity, original thinking, and self-expression in its cultural contexts (e.g., Easley & Easley, 1981; Lee et al., 1996; Lewis, 1992, 1995, 1996; Sato, 1996; Stigler, Fernandez, & Yoshida, 1996; Torrance, 1980; Tsuchida & Lewis, 1996).

Substantiating these claims, some researchers have found that Japanese schools promote self-expression in various subject areas through music, body movement, language, senses, and so on in the elementary school curriculum (Lewis, 1988) and in preschools (Torrance, 1980). Lewis (1992) states that "first graders were observed . . . in animated discussion of their 'treasures' during a reading lesson about a boy's treasures; and in recalling at great length the smells, feelings, and sights of potato digging in a composition" (p. 249). Easley and Easley (1981) also report that Japanese elementary school teachers recognized various approaches that students used to solve problems in math and science, indicating a value placed on creativity in classrooms. International research on teaching elementary school mathematics (Lee et al., 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) indeed demonstrated that teachers in Japan encouraged students' alternative approaches to problem solving, relied on students' answers to generate ideas for conceptual understanding, used language for elaboration and exploration for rules, and presented conceptual information more often than U.S. teachers did. Moreover, these teachers used drills less than their U.S. counterparts did. Stigler et al. (1996) also found that, relative to teachers in the U.S., Japanese elementary-school mathematics teachers provided students a number of opportunities to think, using strategies such as asking "explain how or why" questions that would elicit long verbal elaborations. Similarly, an

international study on elementary science and social studies classes found that Japanese students were encouraged to express their agreement or disagreement and to elaborate their opinions more than their U.S. peers were (Tsuchida & Lewis, 1996). Although many of these studies observed school subjects other than reading and writing, which would be of interest for applied linguistics researchers, these observations demonstrate an educational emphasis on developing analytical thinking skills through the use of language.

Some studies have also reconceptualized the dichotomies, such as collectivism versus individualism and memorization versus creativity, and the meaning of these labels in cultural contexts. Sato (1996) warns against polarizing group orientation and individualism and suggests that both individual and group dimensions be viewed as complementary processes for teaching and learning in Japanese elementary schools. Community-building processes require individual expertise, which in turn contributes to community formation. This reciprocal relation facilitates a new understanding of the role of the group and individuals observed in Japanese schools. Children are given the authority to monitor and regulate various school activities and their own behaviors in small groups, fostering both independence from the adult authority and group solidarity. *Hansei* (reflection), which occurs daily in classrooms, also provides children opportunities to evaluate both individually and collectively their behaviors and feelings as members of a community. Lewis (1995, 1996) also notes that a sense of community in familylike groups gives each individual child a secure environment for enthusiastic self-expression, which occurs daily in elementary classrooms. Such a dialectic understanding also applies to the relationship between the imitation of established forms of language or art and creative expressions. Repetitious practice builds a solid foundation that enables individuals to create something new and original. As Sato (1996) argues, "terms such as 'individual,' 'authority,' 'cognition,' and 'ability' take on new meaning when cast in another cultural framework" (p. 146).

Secondary Education

Compared with elementary education in Japan, secondary education, influenced by examination-oriented instruction, places a greater emphasis on memorization. Researchers agree that secondary school instruction focuses more on memorization of facts and accepted ideas, although creativity, original thinking, and self-expression are fostered through nonacademic activities (e.g., Rohlen, 1983). Lewis (1992) offers three possible effects of examination-oriented memorization on critical and analytic thinking skills: (a) "these skills are learned equally well in

Japan, but are not openly demonstrated in the Japanese high school"; (b) "these skills are learned somewhat later in Japan"; and (c) "the centering of education on memorization results in lasting deficits in critical and analytic thinking skills" (p. 242). According to Lewis, there is no evidence available on the effect of examination-oriented memorization on analytic skills, but, as predicted from the brief review of literature presented above, one piece of evidence shows that Japanese adolescents actually outperformed students in other countries in analytic skills in mathematics, such as hypothesis formation (Walberg, Harnisch, & Tsai, 1986). Whether memorization-oriented education in the secondary schools negatively affects language-based creativity and self-expression is still a contentious issue. Lewis (1992) states that "it is not yet known to what extent the stereotype of Japanese as uncreative may stem from highly visible conformities in behavior (similar clothing or group choice of the same meals) and to what extent Japanese education actually may foster intolerance for divergent thinking in the intellectual domain" (p. 251).

In sum, these recent studies challenge cultural representations such as homogeneity, groupism, and lack of self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking found in the current dominant applied linguistics literature. They also indicate that such representations need to be viewed as particular knowledge rather than objective truth and that such knowledge is contested by counterknowledge. What is also suggested is the need to understand the meaning of labels such as individualism and creativity within a specific cultural context. Further research is under way on linguistic and conceptual development and socialization processes among children in Japanese schools (e.g., Austin, 1998), and the results of inquiry of this kind might indeed produce different knowledge that further challenges stereotypical cultural representations.

PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

The literature reviewed earlier in this article promotes certain pedagogical orientations for teaching English to culturally different students by uncritically exploiting the notion of cultural differences. Among these pedagogical recommendations, two positions stand at odds: (a) the

[3] Transmission-oriented teaching is not uncommon in U.S. secondary schools as well. Those who are involved in teacher education in U.S. institutions would perhaps agree that teachers need always to be reminded to give students ample opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills through experiential learning, inductive questioning, and student-centered activities.

acculturation of ESL students to the mainstream language and culture and (b) the promotion of rhetorical-cultural pluralism in the mainstream English community. On the one hand, the acculturation model based on cultural differences is concerned with teaching the dominant form of language and culture that ESL students lack, thus resulting in students' cultures being treated as deficits. The pluralist model, on the other hand, recognizes and respects ESL students' native cultural and linguistic traditions, promoting their preservation. However, this model fails to interrogate the constructed nature of cultural differences and to give ESL students access to discourses of power. An alternative model is that of critical multiculturalism and critical literacy, which would adequately address the complex issues of culture and their pedagogical implications. Here are the three models in more detail.

The Acculturation Model

First, the acculturation model promotes the explicit teaching of the conventions of the target discourse community to ESL students in order to overcome cultural differences. This position argues that ESL students have cultural values and traditions that are different from the cultural assumptions of the mainstream pedagogy for non-ESL students in the U.S. (e.g., audience, voice, and critical thinking). Pedagogical recommendations include a *discipline-oriented approach* to L2 academic writing (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996) and a *cognitive apprenticeship approach* (Atkinson, 1997), in which the conventions of the target academic discourse community are explicitly taught to ESL students. The acculturation model takes for granted cultural differences and exploits them as a justification for the specific pedagogical needs of ESL students, while resisting mainstream assumptions about audience, voice, and critical thinking for teaching ESL. This view, however, regards the native language and culture as problematic and limiting, thus rendering them deficits and characterizing their speakers as coming from culturally deprived backgrounds (Zamel, 1997).

The Pluralist Model

In contrast, the pluralist model respects cultural differences and promotes rhetorical pluralism in mainstream English-speaking discourse communities by allowing students to express their voices in their own cultural mode of expression. To achieve this goal, Land and Whitley (1989), for instance, suggest that ESL teachers should change the way they read, respond to, and evaluate ESL writers' work. McKay (1993)

suggests that teachers and students engage in candid discussions about cultural traditions of writing and that ESL teachers promote recognition of and respect for different cultural traditions in larger discourse communities. Despite its good intention, however, the discourse of cultural pluralism does not critically explore issues of the construction of certain cultural representations, nor does it examine how power comes into play in the distinction between dominant and subordinate forms of rhetorical conventions. This discourse merely stops at the level of increasing dominant readers' tolerance and awareness of different cultural traditions.

Rhetorical pluralism should certainly be sought in order to allow ESL students to express their own voices. However, rather than simply affirming and respecting different cultural traditions as a given, there needs to be a critical examination of how cultural labels that distinguish one culture from another are produced in discourses and relations of power. Also needed is an examination of the pedagogical tension between teaching the dominant language and preserving cultural identity. In teaching academic literacy skills to ESL students, critical multiculturalism and critical literacy offer some insight into understanding cultural differences and coming to terms with the pedagogical tension.

Critical Multiculturalism

As the third model, critical multiculturalism in a broad sense demands not only recognition of and respect for cultural diversity but also critical investigation into one's cultural heritage and school curricular and everyday lived experiences by locating them in social, economic, and political conditions that produce and legitimate them (Kanpol, 1997). In critical multiculturalism, representations of culture are understood as the consequence of social struggles over meanings that manifest certain political and ideological values and metaphors attached to them, and such representations "stress the central task of transforming the social, cultural, and institutional relations in which meanings are generated" (McLaren, 1995, p. 42). In this view, cultural labels and metaphors such as groupism and harmony are not neutral or apolitical but produced and reinforced by social forces. Thus, critical multiculturalism rejects a form of liberal thinking in which cultural differences are affirmed merely as an end in themselves without an understanding of how difference is produced, legitimated, and eliminated within unequal relations of power (Giroux, 1988, 1995). This view indicates that ESL professionals need to go beyond simply affirming and respecting the culture of the Other and romanticizing its authentic voices—they need to critically explore how

cultural differences as a form of knowledge are produced and perpetuated and how they can work toward transforming the status quo.

Acquisition of the Dominant Codes

Critical multiculturalism as social transformation, however, has to deal with the contentious issue of whether or not the dominant language and cultural codes should be taught to ESL students. As mentioned above, the acculturation model stresses explicit teaching of the conventions of dominant academic communities over expressions of authentic voice of ESL students, whereas the pluralist model stresses authentic voice over dominant cultural and linguistic canons. Conversely, a critical literacy approach both affirms and critically interrogates what is perceived as the authentic voice of students and, at the same time, does not negate the teaching of the linguistic codes of the dominant culture. Freire (1993) argues that people must respect the linguistic and cultural traditions of subordinate groups—it is absolutely wrong to belittle them as being inferior or incorrect. However, legitimating the vernaculars of minority groups does not exclude their need to acquire the dominant language. The cultural and linguistic codes of the dominant group need to be demystified and taught so that the subordinate students "can use the dominant knowledge effectively in their struggle to change the material and historical conditions that have enslaved them" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 128). In this view, the dominant form of language is not taught for the mere purpose of acculturation through *banking pedagogy,* in which certain information is uncritically transmitted to students and the existing unequal relations of power are legitimated. Rather, the language is taught in order to give the students a voice so that they can "fight for the transformation of an unjust and cruel society" (Freire, 1993, p. 135). In critical literacy, the teacher and students need to read, write, and discuss with critical consciousness how the existing knowledge of cultural differences is formed and what kind of meanings are attached to dominant and subordinate forms of culture and language. At the same time, they need to engage critically in the acquisition of the dominant codes of the target language.

A view similar to critical literacy is expressed by other educators as well. For example, Delpit (1986, 1988, 1995) and Reyes (1992), who are engaged in educating minority students in the U.S., argue for the need to both maintain cultural heritage and develop the skills necessary for success in mainstream society. Rodby (1992) also promotes a dialectic approach to ESL literacy education that embraces both learning the dominant codes of English and resisting the power of English native speakers by appropriating the language of authority. Also from critical

multiculturalism, Grant and Sachs (1995) cite Lamont and Lareau (1988) and argue that "students must realize that the acquisition or nonacquisition of certain cultural beliefs, values and experiences can lead to their exclusion or inclusion from certain jobs, resources and high status groups" (p. 100).

The dominant linguistic and cultural codes, however, should not be taught based on colonialist or assimilationalist discourse or purposeless exercises of copying, filling out worksheets, and memorizing. Such practices, observed in ESL classes in U.S. schools by McKay and Wong (1996) and Valdés (1998), prevent learners from investing in their learning and from developing a critical understanding of why learning the dominant codes is necessary. Instead, the teaching of the dominant code needs to be grounded in a critical understanding that no particular culture or language (or variety of a language) is superior to others, that learning the dominant cultural and linguistic codes does not have to mean sacrificing one's cultural and linguistic heritage, and that the learner can appropriate the dominant linguistic and cultural codes in order to advocate cultural and linguistic equality in the wider society.[4] Again in the context of minority education, Delpit (1995) identifies good teachers as the ones who allow learners to practice the dominant language in nonthreatening rather than coercive contexts, have a real purpose, are not bound to textbooks, set high standards, challenge all learners by pushing them to think, connect learning to students' real lives, communicate with the students, and value their past experiences. In this perspective of critical literacy, pluralism is sought not by neglecting to teach the dominant language and culture but by adding a discourse of power to the repertoire that students bring to the mainstream society.

Overall, respecting and preserving cultural and linguistic codes that are different from one's own are necessary to create equality in society. However, in the present age of conservatism that is spreading outside ESL classrooms, this goal, realized by some ESL professionals, may not be shared by some schoolteachers, administrators, college professors, workers, business leaders, fellow students, and others. ESL teachers need to ensure that their students have opportunities to develop skills that

[4] Teaching the dominant form of language per se does not guarantee access to power. A criticism of the genre-based writing movement in Australia, which attempts to teach directly socially and educationally valued texts that would not be taught in a traditional curriculum, warns against totalizing power and uncritically perpetuating a particular genre through the transmission of skills (Luke, 1996). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of different kinds of capital, Luke argues that the acquisition of cultural and symbolic capital by learning the genre of power does not necessarily provide access to power. He suggests that economic and social capital needs to be critically examined in this debate and that transformation of socioeconomic conditions needs to be sought.

allow them to participate fully in a dominant society. At the same time, teachers and learners need to develop a critical awareness of the social-cultural consequences of using the dominant language and to find ways to appropriate the dominant language to create different meanings. In addition, human interactions and socializations are a two-way process. Thus it is not only students who need to do the accommodating; accommodation is a mutual process. Schools, institutions, and the wider society must allow and adopt a strategy of *accommodation without assimilation* (Nieto, 1996).

CONCLUSION

This article has critiqued the taken-for-granted representations of Japanese culture that appear in the applied linguistics literature by situating them in the discourse in which this particular knowledge is constructed and contested. The West-East dichotomy of cultural representations is seen as constructed by a colonial discourse that seeks to isolate a particular definition of the Other as Japanese. Further, the Other itself has taken up the discourse of its cultural uniqueness, manifesting Japanese leaders' struggle to reclaim the Japanese identity in the face of increasing Westernization. Western researchers then regard the voices of the Other that stress cultural uniqueness as authentic voices, further legitimating Othering. In the discursive field, new knowledge constructed by alternative research perspectives has begun to challenge the myths of Japanese education. This critique of cultural differences suggests that ESL teachers and researchers critically examine cultural differences rather than take them as unquestionable truths. Perspectives from critical multiculturalism and critical literacy facilitate a view of culture as a site of political and ideological struggle over meaning. They also provide a pedagogical foundation for both affirming cultural heritage and teaching the dominant language by critically examining the representations of both the dominant and the subordinate cultures.

To close, I find the issues discussed in this article highly complex and difficult to articulate. Engaging in this critique has forced me to reflect on my own experiences of learning, teaching, reading, and writing English as a Japanese woman who has learned English for academic purposes as an L2. While writing this article, I constantly asked myself the following questions: Is engaging in critique as I have done in this article atypical Japanese behavior? Does the applied linguistics literature somehow misrepresent Japanese culture, which has an authentic identity? Will the audience for whom I intend to write this article hear my voice if I write it in my vernacular or in an unedited, authentic voice? Will my

voice be heard if I do not construct my argument by drawing on some influential male thinkers of the West? What about students who are acquiring ESL—will their voices be heard, particularly outside the ESL classroom, if they do not acquire and negotiate with the discourse of power? My tentative answers summarize the intent of this article. As I will, other teachers and researchers should continue to explore these questions of cultural politics rather than continuing to essentialize the culture of the Other.

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