Critical Applied Linguistics

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Applied linguistics (AL) research and practice are critical at their core. To date, AL scholars have surveyed a broad range of language-related issues and phenomena including translation and interpretation, education and literacy, language pedagogy and language teacher education, second language acquisition, language pragmatics, language ideologies and identities, and language policy and planning. This short list reveals both the profoundly humanistic nature of AL as a branch of the social science and the need for AL scholars of all strands to conceptualize their work in social and cultural terms. In this paper, I work from the premise that criticality must be of central importance to our work. From this basis, I then discuss some of the core principles of critical AL research and attempt to raise awareness among *JALT Journal* contributors and readers of the need to appreciate and engage with the profoundly social and cultural nature of the work we do.

　応用言語学研究とその実践は、本質的に批判的なものである。これまで、応用言語学研究者は、翻訳と通訳、教育とリテラシー、言語教育と言語教師教育、第二言語習得、語用論、言語イデオロギーとアイデンティティ、言語政策と計画を含む言語関連の幅広い問題と現象を調査してきた。ここに列挙した項目から明らかになることは、社会科学の一分野としての応用言語学の極めて人間的な性質と全ての分野の応用言語学研究を社会的・文化的に概念化する必要性である。この論文では、私は我々の仕事および応用言語学にとって批判的な考え方（criticality）が最も重要であるという大きな前提から論を進める。その上で、私は、批判的応用言語学研究の中核的な原則を論じ、我々が従事する仕事が社会や文化と深く関わっていることを理解して取り組む必要性について、JALTジャーナル寄稿者と読者のみなさんの意識を高めることを試みる。

Applied Linguistics and Criticality

To introduce myself as sociolinguist, researcher with a penchant for critical social analysis and social theory, and incoming associate editor of *JALT Journal*, I outline in this short paper my understanding of some of the core conceptual principles of a critical approach to applied linguistics (AL), an understanding largely informed by critical realism. To that end, I discuss some of the problems with constructivist/poststructuralist critique—the currently dominant approach to critical AL—and present critical realism as a valuable alternative that affords researchers a layered and complex[1] view of society, of social phenomena including language learning and teaching, and of systems of oppression and social inequality, which are the foci of social critique. The main purpose of this article is to foreground the "nuts and bolts" of critical AL research and bring attention to some of its core concepts and theories. Although many different approaches to conducting robust and insightful critical AL research are available, I hope that the argumentation I provide encourages future *JALT Journal* contributors to actively engage with theory and inspires them to improve critical AL research through their own research projects.

Criticality is inherent to AL rather than a mere addition to it. This becomes evident when we consider language learning and teaching—perhaps AL's most populated field of practice—as embedded within a broader *educational* project marked by a profound ethical commitment to personal and social emancipation. In part, this ethical commitment involves critically unpacking the relationship between beliefs and worldviews, cognition and situated actions with regards to teachers (Crookes, 2015) and learners alike. For example, the ways English language teachers and learners conceptualize motivation, engagement, and performance (including what constitutes appropriateness or an 'error'), how they valorize particular varieties of English and/or accents, how they prioritize particular forms of competences, and how they understand the process of learning itself, necessarily implicate pre-existing culturally laden assumptions, beliefs and ideologies about people, social roles, education, culture, and the role of language in the construction of social life. More specifically, the critical nature of the language learning and teaching strand of AL becomes apparent when we consider the marked cultural and ideological contents of language learning materials, or the ways in which instructions, tasks, activities, and assessment strategies are designed by teachers, school administrators, and the broader language testing industry in a variety of contexts (Pennycook, 2021). In AL research, this critical core is also evident when we consider cultural and ideological

influences on how research variables (e.g., learner characteristics, learning tasks), context, methodological strategies (e.g., interview, survey, pretest/posttest), and pedagogical goals (e.g., performance on tests, communicative competence, language ownership) are developed and operationalized, and how data analysis leads to specific interpretations or conclusions and not others. Clearly, AL is not a neutral field of research and practice, and rather than accepting underlying beliefs and ideologies as "common sense", understanding and improving them thus necessitates a critical perspective. As AL is invested in particular views of the world and not others, it is thus incumbent upon its scholars and practitioners to reflect on their own practices through criticality.

If we accept the above argument, common claims among AL scholars and practitioners must then be critically unpacked. For example, to say "I don't need to focus on critical issues because I'm only teaching vocabulary, grammar, or conversation" is to overlook much of the ideological grounds upon which that work becomes possible. Likewise, to say "critical issues are extraneous to my study, which only looks at the effects of a particular teaching approach on language development" is to sidestep crucial elements in the cause-effect relationship under scrutiny. Pennycook (2021) criticizes these common stances among AL scholars and practitioners by emphasizing the notion of *choice*:

> [F]or those who say we are just language teachers or just applied linguists and should not involve ourselves with such concerns, I say that we already are involved. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and claim these are not our concerns. We cannot sit on the fence and say we cannot make choices. (p. 148)

Beyond situated choices, of course, are myriads of social forces and mechanisms situated at micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society of profound consequences to how teachers teach, learners learn, and researchers conduct their studies.

Consequently, the question we face as AL scholars and practitioners is not "Should we focus on critical issues?" but rather "Is it even possible for us to avoid them?" The first question makes sense only if we accept the problematic assumption that criticality is a mere addition to mainstream AL; the latter question—the more appropriate one in my view—focuses explicitly on the ethical dimension of the work we do. Of course, AL is a branch of the social sciences, and because the social sciences are inherently critical, as

they are invested in understanding the structure-culture-agency relationship, bifurcating critical issues can undermine progress in AL research and practice, and weaken its contribution to social science.

Hymes (1973) made one of the earliest calls for a critical AL, followed notably by Pennycook (1990), Phillipson (1992) and Rampton (1995) who in their own ways critiqued existing AL scholarship in a global context dominated by neoliberal ideology. Sociolinguistics has been the branch of AL most responsive to this call, and over the years sociolinguists have worked using conceptual insight from various paradigms including social constructivism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, critical pedagogy, and sociocultural theory, each with unique insight into the complex, fluid, and contingent relationship between language, people, and society[2]. Scholars have also brought further sophistication to our collective understanding of the links between language, people, and society by working within strands of AL scholarship including (critical) discourse analysis, critical translation research, research on legal and/or health-related consultation, critical literacy, critical language learning, teaching and testing, intercultural communication, and, in a broad sense, critical sociolinguistics (see Pennycook, 2021, for an extensive discussion). The goals of critical AL include:

- understanding how language(s) is(are) used, develop(s), and operate(s) in relation to power, including the ideological partitioning of specific languages into specific social practices (e.g., pedagogy, daily chat, identity work, intercultural communication, business communication, popular culture);
- understanding the complex relationship between situated language-related activities (e.g., classroom discourse) and broader social issues including education, economy, environment, etc.;
- unpacking and dismantling the enduring influence (on both AL research and language learning and teaching) of
  - rigid theories and concepts about language
  - social inequalities resulting mainly (although not exclusively) from white-male-heterosexual hegemony
  - neoliberalism (defined by Pennycook, 2021, as a product of colonialism and imperialism), and the complicity between the multi/plural 'turn' in recent AL scholarship and neoliberalism (Kubota, 2014);
- questioning (beyond the smokescreens of globalization and neoliberalist ideologies) why language learners have to learn *this* particular language and not another; and

- improving language-related practices, including language learning and teaching and the maintenance of endangered languages, by empowering language learners, teachers, and users.

   The above goals might appear to some *JALT Journal* readers as overly abstract and detached from the day-to-day reality of the language classroom. However, a simple adjustment in perspective shows that they are not. Indeed, critical work can become an integral part of a practical approach to language pedagogy if, for example, policymakers, textbook publishers, school administrators, teachers, and learners:

- identify examples of essentialization and commodification of traditional aspects of Japanese culture in government approved junior and senior high school EFL textbooks (self-Otherization and self-orientalism), and develop more complex and diverse views of Japanese culture(s) and other cultures;
- question the practice of training students to become promoters of an essentialized vision of Japanese culture to a foreign audience (as evident in MEXT policies and MEXT-approved textbooks), and foster students' intercultural knowledge, awareness, skills and competence;
- unpack the hegemony of cultural difference and (self-)Otherization, towards a critical view of culture, intercultural communication, and language learning;
- question the problematic notion of *authenticity* and move beyond inner circle Englishes as models of "real English" (and the related view of English varieties as "deficient" or "wrong"), towards the development of, and appreciation for, a Japanese variety of English;
- move beyond the neo-colonialist, raciolinguistic emphasis on the *native-speaker* model, towards a decolonized approach to language pedagogy, with the *intercultural speaker* model at its main point of reference (House, 2007);
- move beyond a positivist, mechanistic vision of language learning as input-output process (e.g., as measured through pretest/posttest methodologies), towards a more complex, organic, and sociologically informed view of the learning-teaching relationship;
- move beyond a deficit perspective framing Japanese learners of English as a-critical, in need of Western cultural input from "native-speakers", towards an appreciation of and practice with different approaches to criticality; and

- change the practice of hiring "native-speakers" solely as oral communication teachers and as members of a temporary, disposable workforce.

Although incomplete, this list clearly includes tasks of direct relevance to the language classroom and to the lives of language learners and teachers. Of capital importance to the accomplishment of these tasks is recognition that learners are reflexive and critical beings, with ideas and beliefs of their own, able to handle—at least to some extent, and in their own ways—the complexities of the world in which they live. Also crucial, the accomplishment of these tasks requires a practical mindset and (too often forgotten or overlooked) active engagement with theory. In the next section, I highlight the centrality of theory in critical AL.

We Need Good Critical Theory for Good Practical Critical Work

As an applied field of social inquiry, AL has most often, and for much of its history, been developed and understood as invested in the production of practical knowledge, techniques, and strategies of benefit to real language users in real contexts. Although not particularly controversial, this view of AL has unfortunately served as justification for limited conceptual and theoretical engagement by AL scholars and practitioners. Also unfortunate is a widely shared belief among AL scholars and practitioners in a problematic and unproductive dichotomy between theory and practice. Poststructuralist AL scholars have been perhaps the strongest supporters of the view of theory as mere story or narrative. That being said, limited conceptual and theoretical engagement can be observed within both *successionist* AL (which generally includes quantitative, statistics-based AL research) and *interpretivist* AL (which tends to be more qualitatively-oriented and focuses on the interpretation and critique of discourse practices, identity work, and ideologies; Bouchard, 2021; Sealey & Carter, 2004).

Successionist and interpretivist AL share an ambivalent relationship with theory because they are both *empiricist* approaches to social inquiry. As I argue in Bouchard (2021), empiricism—the view that reality and the knowledge of it are derived from and contained within sensory experience, apprehensible largely through the use of recording devices and/or measuring instruments—considerably limits the range of possibilities for researchers. Empiricism is limiting because it overlooks important aspects of reality (e.g., structures of oppression, beliefs and ideologies, social structures and mechanisms) that we cannot directly perceive through our senses or measuring instruments. We can, however, understand these aspects

through their effects on empirically accessible phenomena (Bhaskar, 1998). Learning provides a good example: No one can identify the precise moment when learning occurs, although we can theorize that learning has indeed occurred in students' observable behaviors (Kaidesoja, 2013). At a more abstract level, although no one can touch, feel, or delimit the boundaries of a social class, we know that social class distribution is a reality (or an underlying generative mechanism, to use realist terminology) precisely because it affects people's daily lives. Likewise, even if the boundaries, depth and scope of an ideology such as native-speakerism or *nihonjinron* cannot be apprehended or measured empirically (Bouchard, 2017, 2020), the fact that it can influence how people choose to act in context means that we are required to conceptualize it not as a mere narrative but also as an objective phenomenon with causal potential. This is not an intellectual argument but rather a principle of direct relevance to AL research and practice. As Sealey and Carter (2004, p. 63) argue,

> Even the most practical of applied linguists, whose principal concerns are with helping language learners to make more successful progress in their studies, for example, have to make use of some theoretical constructs in conceptualizing language . . . no applied linguist (when being an applied linguist, that is, and thus, by our definition, a social scientist) can take "real language" as given and unproblematic. Some theorizing and analysis inevitably goes with the territory.

In this statement, the authors also argue that interest in the practical aspects of AL research (e.g., the effect of particular teaching approaches on language development) requires a conceptual view of causality, and such view can only emerge from active engagement with theory. Contra poststructuralism, the thorny issue of causality can be dealt with in non-deterministic fashion. For example, critical realists prefer to think of causal *mechanisms* rather than *laws*, and consider causal explanations as inescapably partial. They nevertheless hold on to the notion of causality, for as Sayer (2000, p. 73) argues, if one cause is not established as more important than another cause,

> our hair colour would have to be deemed just as vital for our survival as the functioning of our hearts. If all causes are equal, it is not clear how we could explain anything, or how one could ever hope to achieve anything (cause something to happen) by

> acting, for if no cause is more important than any other, then doing nothing is as effective as doing something.

The crucial point to remember here is that causality is not an empirical phenomenon. Therefore, we must use theory to, for example, determine the properties and powers of people, objects, and ideas, because these properties may or may not include causal potential. This would allow language teachers to conceptualize people as causally efficacious rather than teaching methodologies or learning materials, which as cultural resources can only provide constraining and enabling influences. In sum, theory allows us to sort out important issues, including complexity, emergence, and causality, to then construct robust analyses of our data (Bouchard, 2021).

Some (especially within the interpretivist strand of AL) have argued that theories can be restrictive because they present reality or aspects of reality through a rather fixed lens or realm of perception. In response, I agree with Pennycook's (2021, pp. 42-43) description of theories as

> ways of thinking about social structure, knowledge, politics, pedagogy, practice, the individual, or language. Not a fixed body of impenetrable ideas, but a set of usable, questioning, problematizing concerns that take knowledge and its production as part of their critical exploration.

To me, the view of theories as fixed narratives has always seemed rather odd. After all, theories are products of centuries of human deliberation and understanding of the world and their place within it. Yet, we have always drawn from and modified them in light of new evidence and insight. Theories, in this sense, are social constructions, but they are also profoundly about the world in which we live. Theories are also somewhat detached from situated interaction, which means that they cannot be reduced to mere narratives constructed in situ to achieve specific discursive effects. Moreover, even if theories may appear as somewhat fixed and "out there" beyond lived experience, they are—and have always been—amenable to ongoing refinement (due to our capacity to claim that theory X is better than theory Y because of evidence Z). As such, to think of theories as fixed and immutable discursive realities far beyond lived experiences unable to account for the fluid nature of social reality (a common poststructuralist argument) makes sense only if we (a) detach them from their objective, material, and historical points of reference, (b) view them outside their historical trajectories, and (c) fail to understand how people develop practical insight and strategies in response to complex real-world problems.

Lukewarm engagement with theory by AL scholars and practitioners also limits AL's potential to produce insight, models, and concepts of value to other domains of the social sciences including sociology, anthropology, law, healthcare, and so on. Theory, it must be underlined, is an essential tool with which we come to understand the complexity of social reality, particularly its rather opaque features including systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, neoliberalism, social class distribution) as underlying generative mechanisms. In this sense, theory does not "get in the way" of good, practical, and/or critical AL work but rather constitutes an essential component of transdisplinarity and, of course, good social science, applied or otherwise.

Two additional points must be clarified with regards to theory. One is that we need to be clear about what we mean by theory, particularly when it comes to explaining its relationship to practice. This is because there are many different kinds of generalized statements about observed phenomena (e.g., paradigms, social theories, middle-range theories, models, concepts) that can be distinguished in terms of referents and levels of abstractness. The other point is that, if our shared concern among AL scholars and practitioners is to improve our field and produce new insight, talks of theory in journal contributions must not be discouraged for instrumental reasons (e.g., prioritizing ideas for the classroom, promoting activities at one's institution). Let's remember that our research findings should, in principle, inform a large public (thus possess some generalizable qualities) and test existing theories with the aim of bringing further sophistication to existing knowledges. Even though theories might not be directly applicable to our Monday morning classes, greater theoretical understanding certainly provides more robust grounds upon which effective and critically informed pedagogical strategies can then be developed.

Critical AL and the Conflation of Reality Within Discourse

This section focuses on another noticeable problem in constructivist and poststructuralist critical AL research: The conflation of social reality within discourse. Indeed, acknowledgment and critique of similar tendencies in other strands of the social sciences has contributed in large part to the emergence and growing popularity of critical realism.

The realist critique of constructivist/poststructuralist critical social research is that society is layered, encompassing discursive and material objects and phenomena located in the transitive and intransitive realms of human experience. This means that not everything in society can be reduced to discourse, nor to the transitive realm of situated human experience.

Likewise, although the subjects of critical AL research and the methodologies used to study them might contain ideological properties (e.g., native-speakerism, *nihonjinron*), ideologies also refer to concrete things (e.g., a majority of people in a country learning one particular language as children and not another, Japanese culture/society possessing some features that are distinct from other cultures/societies), and often lead to real human actions in real contexts (e.g., "native-speakers" being hired as ALTs/oral communication teachers, teachers telling their students that English is difficult for Japanese people to learn because Japan is an island country). For critical realists, it is therefore important to account for the links between discourse and action in context, and move beyond the limiting conclusion that ideological structures and social inequalities are mere discursive realities, alterable through alternative discursive activities. This understanding is also voiced by Pennycook (2021, p. 18, emphasis mine), who argues that "the [poststructuralist] idea that social change can be brought about by changing the ways languages are used and taught misses the point that social forces of inequality are far greater than this." To this, I would add that what is often missing in contemporary critical AL scholarship is an explicit focus on the underlying generative mechanisms leading to the emergence of social inequalities, which again are the foci of social critique. One such underlying generative mechanism is social class distribution (Block et al., 2012). Making a similar argument, Pennycook (2021) explains this lacuna within critical AL as the result of a general lack of critical social analysis and the problematic assumption that discourse is the principal element of social life worth investigating, arguing that "a multilingual turn in itself does not constitute a critical orientation . . . without a broader social agenda around the political economy of multilingualism, a multilingual turn dos not carry enough critical weight in itself" (p. 17). In Bouchard (2021, p. 66), I follow suit by arguing that

> Although people's understandings of their world and their experiences within it can be transformatory to some extent (i.e., people can indeed develop new ways of seeing the world), effects can only be local and considerably limited, for with empiricism what is missing is the consequential relationship between agency and structure/culture (where social oppression essentially originates and is maintained). From this ontologically flattened viewpoint, social emancipation (and by logical extension social oppression) is understood as emerging from people's understandings of their lived realities . . . One can

think many different things about systemic sexism or racism, and still be subjected to their oppressive forces, and without these systems being challenged in any significant sense.

Critical AL scholars should therefore use theories and concepts capable of accounting for the fact that systems of oppression are relatively resistant to critique and impressively resilient over time, with often devastating effects on people.

In Bouchard (2021), I also contend that social theories and paradigms that place an almost exclusive emphasis on discourse, situated interaction, and the transitive, fluid nature of social life are not (despite their claims to the contrary) conceptually equipped to deal with phenomena such as educational systems, the EFL textbook industry, and issues including language shift and intersecting inequalities. However, I believe the core problem here can be directly captured. The fact that we can label particular discourses and practices as *ideological* and that from this judgment build a critical analysis of them shows that we are not entirely submerged within discourse and/or ideology: We can criticize ideology only by adopting a certain distance from ideology (Žižek, 1994), and this distance is possible because our human perceptions are profoundly constrained by the nature of the reality in which we live and act. Not only do our discursive experiences matter, objective reality does, too, and so we need theories to account for their interrelationship.

Owing to the fact that ideologies are not mere discourses created and negotiated in the moment by human agents, and because ideologies affect people in contexts and so must also possess properties beyond situated interaction, critical AL scholars also need to provide theories and explanatory models to account for how people interact with, draw from and/or resist ideologies as cultural and structural constraints and enablements. This partly involves what MacKenzie (2002) calls a view of ideology as idea-event conjunction rather than a set of ideas. Zotzmann (2017) provides a similarly layered view of ideology and presents ideas, actions, and material phenomena thusly:

> [T]he social world consists of different elements with their own distinctive properties and powers, such as material objects and structures, discourses, social practices, individual agency, identities and language. These powers exist, i.e., they are "real", but can be dormant or inactive . . . Powers thus need to be activated. (p. 37)

In Bouchard (2020), I also bring attention to the need in critical AL research to (a) distinguish between *ideology* as site of debate and *hegemony* as naturalized ideology, and (b) define ideology within democratic contexts not as fixed sets of ideas but rather as complex networks or systems of converging and contrasting ideologies constantly produced and consumed by people "on the ground." To combine these various insights into a robust critical AL inquiry, scholars thus need to analyze ethnographically the discursive and physical activities of research participants in relation to broader structural/cultural realities, rather than simply indexing broader social facts directly from survey or interview data gathered at specific moments in time. There is indeed a marked propensity among critical AL scholars to "read off" ideology from discursive evidence such as policy and/or interview statements, without distinguishing clearly between stated views and broader social realities (a practice also called *level jumping*). Another problem resulting from this sort of practice is that statements tend to be interpreted as direct reflections of reality rather than traces of people's complex, variegated and constantly shifting understandings of reality. At the risk of stating the obvious: Reality and people's understanding of it are not the same thing.

Although over the years I have come across some very insightful constructivist and poststructuralist studies of language, discourse, and ideology in context and have quoted them at length, my main position is that AL, critical or otherwise, cannot merely be a narrative exercise; if it is reduced to that, it will not lead anywhere interesting, at least from a scientific point of view (Porpora, 1987). As with all other strands of the social sciences, critical AL research is ethical; it must therefore remain committed to the elucidation of objective knowledge, and this means being concerned with phenomena within and beyond discourse. Even if AL scholars and practitioners—and all humans for that matter—do not have direct and unmediated access to objective truth, the fact remains that our views of the world are profoundly constrained by the very nature of that world, which exists somewhat independently from our variegated understandings of it. In our attempts to explain ideologies and systems of oppression as *relatively enduring* phenomena, we need a layered (or laminated, or stratified) view of social life that recognizes the complex, distinct, emergent, and contingent properties and powers of social phenomena such as discourses, ideologies, people, institutions, social classes, and other underlying generative mechanisms. In the next section, I argue that critical realism offers such a view.

Critical AL Research From a Critical Realist Viewpoint

Realism is often mistaken as a form of new materialism, a vision antagonistic to any form of relativism. It is sometimes characterized as a renewed positivism which claims to have direct and unmediated access to reality (e.g., Nikander, 2008; Parker, 1998). Adherents to realism as a new materialism hold that its application to scientific projects can therefore lead to a true, infallible form of knowledge. Critical realists reject these assumptions as remnants of *naïve realism*, or *naïve objectivism*, a crude version of realism characterized by a lack of appreciation for the subjective status of human understanding. These assumptions also fail to consider the depth ontology provided by critical realism, notably the notion that social reality and the phenomena within it unfold in layered fashion, or within and across multiple domains of social life (Layder, 1997). The following are tenets of critical realism, as they pertain to the social sciences in general:

- Reality exists somewhat independently of our understanding of it.
- Our various understandings of reality are profoundly conditioned by the very nature of that reality, which means that (a) they are fallible, (b) they are discursively constructed although also about phenomena beyond discourse, and (c) our biased, cultured viewpoints nevertheless allow us to gain insight into objective reality.
- Scientists—and all humans for that matter—can be relative about knowledge but not about reality.
- The central question in critical realist research is thus: "What are the characteristics of reality that lead us to formulate the kinds of theories, models, and understandings we have of reality?"
- This question leads to a broad range of interrogations about the nature of science, knowledge, discourse, social critique, including questions pertaining to the ethical grounds upon which social research becomes possible.
- Awareness of the above points leads to a departure from the traditional Gramscian approach to social critique, towards the view that social constructions, albeit discursive and fluid, also possess important emergent features that make them consequential elements in the development of explanatory statements. This forces researchers to distinguish them from situated interactions and from localized understandings of them, by granting them some degree of objectivity (if only because of the fact that social constructions are also relatively enduring).

- Critical realist research thus becomes largely a matter of mapping out the complex causal relationship between distinct and emergent phenomena (e.g., people, ideologies, structures, mechanisms, culture, material objects) in context and over time.

Stating the final bullet point differently, we can say that critical realist research involves a study of how people make constrained choices in structured and cultured contexts, in light of their objectives and aspirations (Archer, 2012), and as Layder (2006, p. 54) puts it, their capacity "to 'act back', to resist and transform the social circumstances in which they find themselves." In many ways, this provides a rather robust and constructive vision for critical AL scholars, from which they can begin to understand the complex and layered experiences of language teachers and learners in their contexts.

Emerging from these tenets, of course, are clear methodological implications: As suggested earlier, critical AL researchers need to do more than rely on policy texts or survey and interview statements, and "read off" ideologies and subject positions from the data. We need to engage in sustained ethnographically informed observation rather than rely on one-off data gathering strategies. We also need to look at points of convergence and divergence in our data (e.g., differences and similarities between what people say and do) and attempt to explain them as products of the complex and ongoing structure-culture-agency relationship. These methodological requirements necessarily involve critical deliberation regarding the people who populate our studies and the data which results from our investigations, because what we are looking at are, by their very nature, distinct, complex, opaque, layered, and often causally efficacious realities unfolding and shifting over time.

Closely aligned with critical realism is Fairclough's (2010) approach to critical discourse analysis. Fairclough discusses at length the problems related to the practice of "reading off" ideology from text, and provides convincing and useful alternatives. Linguistic ethnography—a much broader field, of course—also adopts a layered, transdisciplinary approach to the study of language, people, and context and offers multiple points of entry for the study of ideology. Linguistic ethnography does so by offering, in my view, numerous conceptual and methodological possibilities for dealing with the (perhaps vexatious) fact that our linguistic data do not speak for themselves, nor do they provide direct insight into broader social phenomena such as ideologies and systemic forms of oppression. Perhaps works by Hammer-

sley (2007), Rampton (2006, 2007), Sealey (2007), Snell et al. (2015), and Tusting and Maybin (2007) may serve as reliable points of reference for those interested in following this direction.

Conclusion

AL is critical at its core, and as I argue here and in Bouchard (2021), we need AL to be critical because language learners and teachers cannot be whatever they desire at any point in time and in any context. Instead, their discourses, choices, and actions are structurally and culturally conditioned, and for many, the structure-culture-agency relationship unfortunately does not always yield advantageous outcomes. Studying the lived realities of language learners and teachers therefore requires looking at people's structurally and culturally conditioned existence rather than their discursive practices exclusively. This view takes partly from Popper (1972), who argues that the potential for social change is not a power exclusive to people; it is instead the emergent product of the structure-culture-agency relationship. Of course, the principles discussed in this paper are not set in stone: They are part of a broad and ongoing debate among social scientists about the very nature and practice of critical social research, and it is my sincere hope that *JALT Journal* contributors and readers invested in critical AL research will take an active part in this necessary debate.

Notes

1. In this article, use of the term complex is aligned with complex dynamic system theory and qualifies social phenomena (e.g., language(s), beliefs, values, identities, learning, policies, educational systems) as radically open, non-linear, dynamic, emergent, and contingent systems.
2. To learn about the links between strands of social theory and specific approaches to AL research, I encourage readers to consult Sealey and Carter (2004) and Bouchard (2021).

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