



Emerging scholars

Reimagining global education policy research

Oshie Nishimura-Sahi

Tampere University

Email: oshie.nishimura-sahi@tuni.fi; oshie.nishimurasahi@gmail.com

Abstract

In Finland, doctoral candidates are required to give an introductory lecture as part of their public dissertation defense. This lecture provides the audience with background information on the phenomenon studied in the dissertation, discusses the main results and central arguments, and proposes the potential contributions of the research. This paper is based on the author's dissertation, entitled 'Reimagining Global Education Policy Research: The Case of the European Language Framework (CEFR) Transfer to Japan' (Nishimura-Sahi, 2024; 2020; 2022; Nishimura-Sahi & Piattoeva, 2024).

Keywords: Global education policy, policy transfer, actor-network theory, Japan, education reform, CEFR

Introduction: 'Engrish' problems

The Japanese education system has been acknowledged as a successful model of education for having achieved top-level results in OECD's PISA in the last decades. However, when it comes to its system of foreign language education, the country carries a poor reputation both at home and abroad. A slang term, *Engrish*, metaphorically refers to the difficulties Japanese English speakers face, particularly in pronouncing the English /l/ and /r/ sounds distinctly. As one of the Japanese individuals with this 'Engrish' problem, I felt very insecure about my English proficiency. I often wondered why many Japanese, including myself, cannot speak English fluently even after learning it for more than 10 years in school. This question marked the starting point of my PhD journey.

I initiated my doctoral research after reviewing widespread criticism of Japan's foreign language education



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system in both the media and academic literature. I became interested in why and how the Japanese system of foreign language education had arguably ‘failed’ for decades to develop communicative ability in English and intercultural competencies among Japanese citizens. This interest led me to explore the current adaptation of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR is one of the widely used policy instruments of the Council of Europe, providing a set of pedagogical resources for language teaching, learning, and assessment. The CEFR also offers policy guidelines for policy design and curriculum development that aim to promote linguistic and cultural diversity in individuals as well as societies through language education.

Since its 2001 publication, scholars in applied linguistics have characterized the CEFR as a ‘common standard’ (Deygers et al., 2018) and a ‘common currency’ (Figueras, 2012) that meets the growing need for global frames of reference. In the context of comparative and international education, the CEFR can be regarded as a *global education policy*—one that circulates worldwide and is adapted to educational reforms in various locations. In Japan, the CEFR has been increasingly employed since the 2010s, especially at the institutional and the national levels.

In initially following the debate around the application of the CEFR, one criticism caught my attention. A group of Japanese academics criticised the latest CEFR-oriented reform for ignoring its guiding educational philosophy of respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. This understanding shaped my initial framing of the case and the research questions that my thesis should strive to address: How have the European ideals of language education appeared to cease in the process of CEFR transfer to the Japanese context? In other words, I was interested in how Japan ‘went wrong’ when borrowing the global education policy, CEFR.

To that end, I started browsing a set of policy documents and websites, such as project reports of the CEFR-Japan (CEFR-J) project. The CEFR-J project is a large-scale research project aimed at modifying the CEFR for use in English-language teaching in Japan. The CEFR-J project received substantial research funding (or Kakenhi) from a quasi-governmental organisation under Japan’s Ministry of Education (MEXT). I also interviewed Japanese academics involved in the CEFR-J project, administrators, and English language teachers to learn what happened in the process of the CEFR transfer.

As I continued my qualitative data analysis, I learned that policy transfer is much more than just a linear borrowing and lending of education reform ideas. It is a process involving various actions by numerous actors. I became interested in unpacking these processes and going beyond the norms that suggest the CEFR should be adapted in a specific way. Rather than engaging with such normative-oriented research, I was drawn to more analytical research that reimagines the nature of educational transfer and global education policy.

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More importantly, I came to see my initial research design as problematic through engagement with postcolonial and decolonial literature. There was a normative assumption underlying my mindset. I assumed that the CEFR and its European ideology for language education were universally beneficial, and thus I believed that the model—or the ‘universal good’—should be properly adopted in Japan.

As decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo discusses in his book *Delinking* (2007), the idea of universality is problematic owing to its exclusive nature, which denies differences and the possibility of other approaches. Referring to Mignolo, Silova et al. (2020) critically review policy transfer research that is built on the idea of universality. They challenge the belief that assumes one truth and one universal objective shared across the world. The authors point out that this belief in universalism has driven policy transfer research to search for globally relevant and applicable ‘best practices.’ Having identified the limitation of normative-oriented policy transfer research, they call on research colleagues to break away from the idea of universality and shift to pluriversality ‘where many different worlds and worldviews can coexist on a non-imperial and non-hierarchical basis’ (p. 21).

Inspired by the emerging call for reimagining educational transfer in the pluriverse (see Gong et al., 2023), I became more interested in contributing to this intellectual endeavour. One approach to this research was to empirically describe how the hierarchical division between global ‘policy lenders’ and local ‘policy borrowers’ (see e.g., Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) manifested in the process of policy transfer.

Research (re)designing

In this way, expanding the epistemological options for studying the ‘global’ and the ontological view of the ‘global’ became the central theme of my dissertation. In simple terms, my dissertation aims to expand *the ways we study* and *the ways we understand* the ‘global.’

First, the epistemological aim was achieved by experimenting with the application of actor-network theory (ANT). My initial data indicated that ‘materials’ such as a test score alignment tool, textbooks, and teacher guides all played a crucial role in implementing the CEFR-oriented reform agenda in Japan. I thus found it necessary to explore the work of these materials or ‘nonhumans’ (e.g., Latour, 1993) that modify other entities in the process of power formation through policy transfer. Given the emphasis on symmetrical relations between human and nonhuman entities, I used ANT as a methodological tool to take ‘materials’ seriously in my analysis— materials that are part of the policy networks shaping the world. In so doing, I attempted to demonstrate how the status and/or identity of the ‘global’ is co-constituted and sustained both relationally and socio-materially over the course of policy transfer.

Second, the ontological enquiry into the ‘global’ is achieved by exploring who was involved in CEFR transfer to Japan and what they did in the process. In other words, I attempted to gain insights into the politics of educational transfer. To achieve this objective, I first analysed policy documents and explored the political context that sparked Japanese interest in the CEFR. I also analysed the data collected through interviews and observations to examine how the CEFR was enrolled in the Japanese arena of policymaking and policy implementation. I also explored how certain human actors involved in the CEFR transfer became ‘global’ through the process, and how Japan’s policy transfer of the CEFR contributed to its further elaboration as a ‘global’ education policy.

Results: Exploring ‘nets of work’ connected by materials

In examining the political context, one of the most relevant findings for my research interest was the interplay between global education trends and national policymaking. The findings showed that a global education trend once borrowed—namely, lifelong learning—was domesticated within the Japanese context. The domestication of the global education trend gave birth to a long-standing educational slogan that encourages ‘zest for living’ (生きる力) in children (Takayama, 2014). This, in turn, generated demand for another global education policy, the CEFR. In this spiral of policy ideas, the boundary between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ became rather blurred. And as I will introduce shortly, Japan’s adoption of the CEFR contributed to the further development of the CEFR itself.

This finding regarding the politics of policy transfer contributes to further conceptualising the nature of policy transfer itself. I propose that policy transfer can be imagined as a heuristic practice. It is heuristic in the sense that the adaptation of a reform idea leads to the innovation of new reform ideas.

The role of academics is also noteworthy. By examining public documents, I identified that Japanese academics—specifically linguists who played a crucial role in the CEFR-J project—were instrumental in introducing the CEFR to the Japanese context. They appealed to policymakers to adapt the CEFR, collaborated with educational service providers (e.g., Z-KAI), language test providers (e.g., Benesse), and publishers (e.g., Sanseido) to develop teaching and learning materials and assessment tools linked to the CEFR, and introduced the CEFR-J at teacher training seminars. In this process, the CEFR became part of everyday practices in Japanese schools because it succeeded in establishing connections and influencing educators and learners at a distance through materials. As the CEFR and related materials were publicly available online, there was no need to pay expensive fees or travel to Strasbourg to learn how to use the CEFR. These reform ideas were *waiting for* users or ‘borrowers’ located within their reach. Taking this finding into account, I suggest that global reach is not always proactive mobility. Rather, it is also *passive accessibility* that allows people to find new ideas regardless of where they are and carry the ideas out for

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use in a local context.

Through developing and publicly distributing CEFR-J-related materials and resources, some of the CEFR-J project members enrolled in the policy arena as experts. Because they had the ability to identify potential models for policy borrowing, interpreting, and translating CEFR ideas for use in a Japanese context. This process, in which academics became influential by extending networks from scientific centres to society more broadly, reminded me of Louis Pasteur's laboratory in Paris that Bruno Latour explored to account for the power of science in the world.

The products of the CEFR-J project supported Japanese policymakers, educational publishers and service providers, and teachers in implementing educational reform agendas in everyday educational practices. Additionally, the CEFR-J project collaborated in the further development of CEFR levels by sharing empirical data and research results. The new lower CEFR proficiency levels that the CEFR-J team developed for Japanese learners were seen as a remarkable scientific achievement by international academia. Consequently, the new levels and descriptors contributed by the CEFR-J were adopted into the CEFR companion volume published in 2020. That is, the Japanese case of CEFR transfer was not one of simply 'borrowing' global reform ideas, but also of co-developing them. The co-development of the global education policy was enabled through the collective accomplishment of several actors and contingent elements.

Based on these findings, policy transfer can be conceptualised as a set of practices towards co-development of new educational knowledge—rather than an attempt to transplant best practices from Country A to B—that enables educational practitioners to meet educational challenges through mutual learning.

These findings highlight the **co-constitutive** nature of global education policy.

In the process of co-development, the habitually fixed, binary labels are questioned: Are the CEFR-J project academics policy borrowers or lenders? Are they global or local actors? I suggest both. Japanese academics became global lenders of CEFR-related knowledge and CEFR modification know-how by conducting the CEFR-J project and disseminating the outcomes of the project internationally. The Japanese academics appear as borrower-cum-lender and global-cum-local.

In the Japanese case of CEFR transfer, 'global' actors were made relationally, incessantly, and inseparably from the process of policy transfer. That is, the 'global' and the 'local' are the same entity—they are two sides of the same coin. Global/local positioning depends on the perspective from which one observes the actors.

This finding highlights the **relational** nature of global actors in the field of global education policy.

Although the CEFR-J successfully constituted the ‘power to’ co-develop the CEFR and expertise, this did not mean that power and authority endured permanently. These are incessantly destabilised. After analysing media interviews and Twitter (currently X) posts, I identified that there are multiple realities of the CEFR. In one reality, the CEFR is a technical standard enabling test score alignment, while in another, it serves as a means to promote the European ideal of cultural and linguistic diversity in society. Conflicting realities for the CEFR effectively destabilised a CEFR-oriented educational reform. This ontological conflict was one of the factors leading to the cancellation of the introduction of private-sector language tests for university entrance examinations in 2021. On the other hand, while multiple CEFRs competed with each other, these conflicting ontologies collectively contributed to growing the power and authority of the CEFR. Through political and public debate, the CEFR emerged as the norm for modernising foreign language education in Japan.

This finding highlights the **multiplicative** nature of global education policy.

At the end of reporting the main results of my dissertation, it is worth reflecting upon my ANT-inspired methodology. I recognised both advantages and limitations of the socio-material approach in studying a global education policy. Here I will focus on only two points.

First, I propose that ANT supports decolonial knowledge production by inviting researchers to understand and explicitly illustrate the blurriness of the boundary between policy lenders and borrowers. ANT encouraged me not to settle for abstract concepts—such as ‘global’ and ‘globalisation’—to explain away educational phenomena. Moreover, it helped me to avoid oversimplification or the smoothing out of messy, multi-scalar empirical observations, some of which may have appeared as mundane and insignificant. It equally warns against the ‘overwhelming stability’ of the widely used theories and concepts that might discourage us from understanding the case in other ways (Kariya, 2021, p. 153).

Second, ANT served as a ‘reminder’ nudging me to be aware of my own positionality as an actor whose actions leave imprints in a net of work. In conducting interviews and analysing the collected data, ANT also served as an ethical compass attuned to decolonial thinking, which continuously reminded me to be reflexive of my position. I saw myself as part of the network or assemblage I was researching, rather than an external observer of the network. ANT, as a ‘reminder’ for reflexivity, incorporated me into the analysis by requiring me to locate myself, the researcher, and the researched within a more symmetrical relationship.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the unlearning process

To conclude, I would like to address a question posed by a pre-examiner of my dissertation, Associate Professor Jason Beech from the University of Melbourne. He asked:

I wonder if in their analysis they are demonstrating “the global” or “a global”, in the sense that a different empirical study of another global policy in another place would have made visible another “global”.

My answer to this question is that what I did in my dissertation was to describe how ‘a global’ was made through policy transfer, challenging the perception of ‘the global’ as a structural, futuristic, hyperconnected, and irresistible entity. I argue that ‘a global’ is a continuum of lived-in local places filled with messy practices and ordinary materials.

My dissertation contributes to scholarship on global education policy by empirically showing how a ‘global’ is made and maintained by various actants. It exemplifies how a ‘global’ is co-constituted, relational, and multiplicative. Additionally, it will be of use to those who are interested in employing socio-material approaches to studying policy transfer and policy mobilities in the context of global education policy research.

For me, writing this dissertation was a process of unlearning Japanese foreign language education policy that I had once labelled as a ‘failure’ system. I do not mean to suggest that there are no problems with the Japanese system. It has its own issues that need to be addressed, just like other systems. My point is that unlearning taken-for-granted assumptions is important because the assumptions, such as ‘best practice’ or ‘global education model,’ might carry an inherent hierarchical dichotomy between ‘global lenders’ and ‘local borrowers’ of best practices. Thus, it is crucial to question the asymmetrical setting of value-laden or normative judgments toward a particular education system and critically reflect on the possibility that I might reproduce asymmetrical power relations through my academic work. I propose that policy transfer research is conducted more ethically when we, as researchers, continuously reflect on our practices and position. My proposal resonates with Keita Takayama’s work (2020), which encourages us to embrace ‘negativity’, and Jeremy Rapplewey’s work (2020) on comparative education as cultural critique. Both call for us to open ourselves up to a new avenue of knowing and being through self-reflection on the limits of prior knowing.

I hope my dissertation contributes to challenging the colonial understanding that innovative and advanced educational reform ideas and practices are developed in the West and spread to the periphery. But rather, these are co-produced by the myriads of various actors in different locations. I believe that studying policy transfer as a process of co-producing educational knowledge, policies and practices enables to open up a pathway to a place where many different worlds can coexist on a non-imperial and non-hierarchical

horizon.

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