FORUM

A Western Researcher in a Japanese University Writing Classroom: Limited or Advantaged? Cultural Sensitivity and the Debate on Japanese Students' Critical Thinking

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INTRODUCTION

In a case study research project where a Western researcher is observing Japanese university students in their own classrooms in Japan being taught critical English writing by Western teachers, certainly the issue of cultural sensitivity is crucial. I feel it is my duty as a Western researcher to try to be as objective as possible to be able to have a better understanding of the social phenomena that is learning English writing in a Japanese university. One idea is to try *situated qualitative research* – to try to understand the situation from the students' point of view (Atkinson, 2005). Another idea is to 'remove' myself from my own prior knowledge and prejudices. As a research methodology, this 'innocence' (or ignorance?) is otherwise never really possible, since my own life experience will always affect my understanding of what I observe (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Both of these ideas lead to dilemmas of great philosophical proportions – of trying to understand a cultural scene that is not my own. Ryuko Kubota, a Japanese professor of

English linguistics in the US, offered me this advice via e-mail:

> I think it's impossible to pursue an objective representation of social phenomena. Even if you were Japanese, you would have a certain social, cultural, and economic status that functions as a lens through which you interpret the data in a certain way. So rather than worrying about objectivity, I would expose my own subjectivity and explore what influence it might give to my data collection and interpretation. (R. Kubota, personal communication, Oct. 12, 2004)

My subjectivity is pivotal in my own research since it ultimately defines the boundaries of any observational study I do. But is this a limitation? After reading Professor Kubota's e-mail, I realised it did not have to be a limitation, but rather a clear perspective.

This article will first discuss the cultural setting or 'embededness' of a Japanese university. This will be followed by a discussion of the implications of a Western researcher's understanding of students at that university and their ability and exercise of critical thinking.

ESL WRITING VS EFL WRITING

Many published studies on Japanese students' English writing have been conducted in English-speaking environments (Sasaki, 2005). This ESL setting creates a very different environment in which Japanese students are required to complete writing tasks. Although their thinking may still be in Japanese, these students have a different sense of cultural expectations of their writing, and therefore researchers in the ESL setting must consider cultural subjectivity in this situation from the students' perspective, rather than their own (see Casanave, 2003).

In publications discussing cultural issues in EFL writing instruction (see e.g., Yoshimura, 2001), we understand that native teachers have adjusted their teaching styles as well as their curricula to be more readily acceptable

and understandable for their EFL students (Cumming, 2003). The teachers in my study are native English teachers (as is the trend in Japan – to have native teachers do the composition classes while Japanese teachers do the literature classes). They are giving tasks using familiar topics and asking students to exercise skills they have covered in the class. The writing practices are based on loosely organized syllabus ideas they received at the beginning of the year. This is, as research suggests, really the best they can do. There is not yet a comprehensive theory of writing (Cumming, 1998; Sasaki 2005), and models of both EFL and ESL writing vary according to educational circumstances.

PROBLEMATISING MEANING

This type of qualitative research 'problematises meaning' in that it questions concepts and methodological implications in the creation or development of meaning through research (Jaffe & Miller, 1994). In my research, the 'problem' of meaning is treated by the issues brought up in previous studies that suggest Japanese university students are not able to apply critical thinking to their writing (see Stapleton, 2002). The meaning of 'critical thinking' is the problem that I believe has particular implications for Japanese students and it is these implications that I need to familiarise myself with in order to benefit from research in the Japanese university English writing classroom (see Silva, 2005 for discussion).

'Positionality' is crucial to the understanding of how meaning is problematised in such a research project. It is how I identify myself in terms of my sense of where and to what I *belong* or do not belong, and the social relations that are affected by this (Anthias, 2002). The concepts of positionality and 'structural embeddedness', from an objectivist/positivist perspective (that all reality is objective and external to the mind and that knowledge is reliably based on observed objects and events), have the potential of invalidating my research project (Jaffe & Miller, 1994). Although from a constructionist standpoint (to discover the ways that individuals and groups create their perceived reality)

these concepts can rather be seen to *inform* it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Flowerdew, 2005). My positionality as a Western researcher and native user of the English language is quite different to the students' positionality as Japanese learners attempting to cross-culture and display critical thinking in their writing of English, a foreign language. Culture and language barriers need to be taken into deep consideration and recognition of these barriers as limitations of my research project is essential. Also, my positionality as a Western teacher is one of challenging students and questioning what is commonly accepted, key aspects of critical thinking. The positionality of students in Japan is traditionally quite opposite to mine, in that authority is not meant to be questioned, although more recent research suggests that traditional understanding of Japanese students is no longer valid (see Stapleton, 2002).

The structural embededness in my study is the relationship of the students' experiences with learning English writing and the broader social context of the expectations and understanding of the curriculum at their university in Japan. The broader social context controls these expectations and understanding, which is why researchers in this area are looking more towards social and political aspects to be taken into consideration in second language writing pedagogy, particularly in Japan (see Casanave, 2003). To suggest that Japanese university students are limited by this structural embededness and therefore cannot produce critical thinking in their writing is an area of great criticism in earlier studies (see e.g., Inoue, 1997; McFreely, 1999; Yoshimura, 2001).

ANALYSING THE DATA

In making sense of the data collected in my study, Grbich (1999) emphasises the importance of the researcher's framing and focus in interpretation of the data and identifies four key modes of data analysis. It is essential for me to be able to 'frame' my interpretation of the data in order to discuss it categorically.

Since I am utilising embedded case studies, I will need these frames or categories in order to develop discussions across the different cases. I will use knowledge from previous experience as a writing teacher as well as ideas about potential frames from previous studies. Hyland (2005) explains that the analysis of data is always informed by our own understanding of theories behind writing. Grbich (1999) points out that these frames could potentially dominate the researcher's interpretation possibly distorting existing forms, but the frames are subject to the context in which the data collection takes place, and will ultimately be defined by the context that presents itself.

   Grbich (1999) explains that cultural frames create an inner and outer sense to a group and can also segregate and marginalise. Specialist frames exclude those without training in the particular field. For my analysis, language, cultural and specialist frames are important. Language is central to my study in terms of how and when students and teachers select what words they use in a writing classroom. Cultural frames are necessary in that I am looking at cultural transfer, from the Western teacher to the Japanese students. Specialist frames are useful to see how the teachers' qualifications benefit their approaches to the development of their students' writing skills.

   Culture and organisational embeddedness needs to be taken into consideration in data analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995; Hyland, 2005). Along the lines of Grbich's (1999) cultural frames, is the concept of *local culture*. This is the culture that is made up of shared meanings that give shape to understanding, also referred to as a *discourse community* in genre studies (Paltridge, 2001). It is not meant to determine the biographies of the participants in a study (normally an impossible task given the variety in a discourse community) but rather offer recognisable interpretive resources or *frames* for understanding. Organisational embeddedness is used to reflect relevant individual priorities outside the routine realities outlined by the frames, while at the same time providing those within the organisation with the tools for interpretation of, for example, interpersonal relations, specialised goals, and professional perspectives (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995). This organisational embeddedness is an essential framework in the interpretation of data in my study, as I will need the input

of the students' (Japanese) and teachers' (Western) perspectives on the discourse community in order to allow mine to emerge.

CONCLUSION

It seems it is neither an advantage nor limitation being a Western researcher in Japan. It is rather a clearly definable perspective that needs to be not only recognised by the researcher, but also used as the basis for understanding the culture in which the researcher is studying. This recognition should, by moving past positivism and adopting a constructionist theory, allow the 'positionality' of the Western researcher and the Japanese university student to *inform* the research.

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