

Critical Pedagogy Overseas

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Abstract:

This essay fuses critical pedagogical concepts of selected scholars with real-life narratives of teaching English as a Second Language in Japan. This exposition of critical pedagogues, JET Programme participants and students addresses the challenges of practicing a critical pedagogy overseas. In particular, this essay explores the context of Japan and the subject of English as for future ESL teachers. Rather than practicing a consistent critical pedagogy regardless of geographical location, this essay claims that ESL teachers are in risk unconsciously practicing a contained pedagogy.

Keywords: teaching overseas, English education, contained pedagogy, ESL, Japanese education system, The JET Programme

Article:

The context of the ESL classroom for ESL or TESOL educators is important to consider for critical pedagogy because it sets a very fertile ground for the talk of international news, people, and places. The public listens daily to the discussions of international news, people, and places. These international topics are in constant risk of being stereotyped, oversimplified, or simply mocked. While this paper focuses on critical pedagogical accounts from Japan, the mandated subject of English infused in foreign countries is also schooled as a subject of pain, difficulty, and generalized grunt-work implemented from the West. For these reasons, foreign governments hire perceivably young, creative, and flexible English teachers for prescribed amounts of time to help “bring color” to the curriculum.

Upon entering a diverse community, there are pre-existing structures of “how things are done”, serving as safety nets, and subsequently, factors which constrain critical engagement. In many cases that I have experienced in Japan, these safety nets are perceived as the easiest ways to catch and operate English classes. Such a netted-pedagogy is aided by a stigmatization that collaborating with foreign teachers is tedious and time-consuming. Foreign teachers, alike, start to feel that taking the courageous steps of breaking the ice with the “head teachers” or ESL/TESOL administrators is tedious and unproductive. I use the term ‘netted-pedagogy’ in this essay to describe a phenomenon that occurs when an international teacher and host-country administrator consciously *stop* finding meaningful ways to engage a subject. These nets are ones that do not welcome overseas teachers to make decisions about a curriculum, such as English. For example, if there is an ineffective English textbook being circulated in the system, the

ESL/TESOL educator must abide by the boring books that are distributed by the Japanese government. It is not a grand leap to recognize that foreign-hired teachers in math, science, and social studies classes grapple with these intercultural challenges when applying to “teach overseas”.

Several questions must be addressed when embarking on a teaching endeavor overseas. First, are the teaching candidates satisfied with the possibility of not being able to wholeheartedly teach in the ways they genuinely believe in? Furthermore, are the candidates comfortable in *sharing* their role in a co-teaching environment? The goal of this paper is for future TESOL educators to think more precisely and realistically about teaching overseas from a critical pedagogical perspective. This paper therefore seeks the audience of future educators to recognize and respond to their students’ voices amidst administrative and cultural struggles, whether their teaching assignments are in Africa, Korea, Japan, or China, or a burrow of New York City.

This paper specifically encourages TESOL, ESL, or EFL educators that with mindful, intercultural communication and dialogue, critical pedagogy may shine possibilities into different countries across the globe. First, this paper draws upon related literature from selected scholars in critical pedagogy to address the notion of containment in classrooms. This paper then contributes to a gap in ESL literature by applying critical pedagogy concepts to stories of former ESL teachers. Finally, this paper discusses the social implications of practicing critical pedagogy overseas.

RELATED LITERATURE

Giroux (2010) warns us how we live in a very dangerous time for education in the US. While my research for this paper focuses on accounts from Japan and The JET Program, the lack of critical pedagogy in overseas classrooms is just as dangerous. When guided by hegemonic expectations and high social pressures to perform well on various standardized tests in Japan, it is indeed dangerous to encounter students walking home late at night after studying for hours at a *juku* (塾), or cram school.

Such unhealthy structures in schools beg the question of how knowledge is perceived to be credible. Apple (2004) addresses the critical points of where and how knowledge has been filtered and constructed in classrooms. He suggests that schools are rushing to maximize the production of technical knowledge as a necessity of a consumer-ruled economy. “The knowledge that got into schools in the past and gets into schools now is not random. It is selected and organized from somewhere that represents views of normality and deviance” (p.60). The fact the international programs such as The Jet Program choose candidates based on subjective attributes such as flexibility, creativity, and age poses flippant norms for people who are “right for the job”. Moreover, just because candidates fulfill subjective attributes does not imply that they may be masters of teaching grammar and communicating with diverse audiences. The reason why the JET Program depends so greatly on these characteristics is because of the lack of structured training or instruction upon entering Japanese classrooms.

The reality that ESL teachers seldom receive appropriate training before engaging into a new classroom cultures (Delpritt, Watts-Taffe, & Truscott, 2002, p.1) deserves scholarly discussion. The philosophy of relying on one candidate's attributes that translate to "young, creative, flexible, high college GPA, some foreign language experience" becomes confused with a candidate's skills with effective (English and intercultural) pedagogy. The lack in training methods for overseas educators reminds us of Arnstine's (1995) claim that a serious problem exists in understanding the intuitive purposes of students, as mentioned in his book, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling*, (p.52). Arnstine argues that the purposes of students are not organically constructed or understood by most administration and teachers. The problem defined by Arnstine (1995) relates to the system of test taking in the U.S. as well as other countries that rely heavily on standardized tests, such as Japan. I agree with Arnstine that it is only when a children finds a meaningful and personal purposes for their own education when they may begin effectively remembering the material for tests. Today's competitively global atmosphere presents a bigger struggle for students to find personal and unique links to standardized tests such as the TOEFL and TESOL. However, teachers may enter the picture in helping the students discover these unique and personal links between *their* purposes and the purposes of these tests. If international teachers do not re-claim the importance of their roles in helping students find these links, then such standardized tests in Japan and other East Asian countries become regarded as mandatory, painful constructions with non-enjoyable reputations, reinforced through cram schools (*juku*). From my observations in Japan, cram schools commonly operate late at night during dangerous times when children should already be home with families or friends after long days at school.

When we start to refocus our pedagogy on the purposes of students, we also start finding the real purposes and intentions behind countries that heavily rely on standardized testing. Ayers (2009) argues how standardized testing perpetuates an expensive way to sort people into winners and losers. This way of sorting humans performs noticeable barriers between ESL teachers and students from engaging in critical discussion about politics, race, and cultural values. In other words, there is perceivably no time to discuss curious questions from bright students when there are tests to pass and grammar points to memorize. When overseas educators realize how structures and tests in the host country are in place, a new dialectic for the foreign teachers emerges. The teacher must decide upon "teaching for the test" versus "teaching for understanding".

The international teacher will come to see the paradox of how the purposes of students are not always in sync with the pace in which they learn the material. Although the teacher knows that all students do not learn at the same pace in the classroom, adhering to a set pace to teach students for standardized tests becomes a hegemonic act facilitated by teachers. Ayers (2009) reminds us that teaching is not to be forced or faked. Likewise, Freire (1997) brings us back to his very original debut in the context of teaching English to adults in Brazil. It is inspiring that one of the most respected critical pedagogues had origins in teaching English as a second language to diverse audiences. Freire (1997) helps us think about different kinds of learners by the compassion he showed for marginalized citizens in the adult Brazilian community. His style of problem posing has

been adapted and shared for the purposes of education across a wide variety of groups. Rather than simply lecture or impose information onto students, inviting students to help solve problems are inclusive moves that create open environments. Open environments are genuine educational sites where different news is voiced as students find ways to solve the problems.

An environment that engages a problem posing style is similar to how Bloch-Schulman and Jovanovic (2010) discuss how students, too, may thoughtfully examine politics in everyday, public classrooms. When talking about politics and religion, many students and teachers start to perform a certain dance around these topics for fear that their news will not be liked by others. The need to teach politics, or at least bring different topics into classrooms in constructive ways becomes important for stimulating critical thought and civic literacy. The open discussion about politics gives these pre-existing hunches held by students the opportunity to finally “come out”. After all, students inevitably hear bits and pieces of politics on the street, from their parents, or the television. What is necessary is a place to bring that bricolage together for thoughtful examination.

Carr (2008) mentions how “No one knows everything and that we can always learn” as a lesson for overseas teachers to think about during their contracts. Since hired teachers are paid for speaking, correcting, and teaching a language that commonly as easy as breathing to them, a common expectation is for foreign teachers to know every meticulous grammar point about the English language. While this promotes healthy challenges of finding creative ways to explain English concepts to young students, teachers can feel more contained or ineffective when a perfect explanation of an English pronunciation does not come to the surface.

A unique phenomenon of Japanese education that the ESL teacher might incidentally feel is called *wabi sabi* (Powell, 2005). From my observations in Japan, *Wabi sabi* a coined term of thinking about something that is very old. I agree that *Wabi sabi* (わびさび) can be seen, felt, heard, or introduced to anyone. Powell states that part of embracing *wabi sabi* is the act of holding a value for imperfection or incompleteness. I find that this aesthetic way of living did and continues to push me greatly when in transition between different audiences, countries, and different people. The reason why *wabi sabi* pushes me through and to different (groups of) people is due to the realization of imperfectness amidst sincerely trying hard. Additionally, imperfection is realized when the ESL teacher tries hard to fit in and understand the “other” culture. Undoubtedly, despite proficiency in foreign language and acculturation, the (foreign) teacher never fully or genuinely becomes part of the other culture. This paper takes a stance that the reason why foreign teachers cannot fully integrate into the host culture is due to an underlying ideology of races staying mentally and geographically compartmentalized. For example, even though people of different races move to different countries (for many years), the questions of “What country are you from?” are consistently asked. While phatic questions may seem innocent, they mentally compartmentalize the visibly foreign person further away from the current country. Instead, the phatic question could be “Where in the neighborhood do you live?” The commonly temporary status of the ESL teacher’s contract reminds us of its imperfectness (Powell, 2005).

Moreover, overseas educators should keep in mind that they will likely run into a general background chaos (Powell, 2005) that will deter a critical pedagogy. Background chaos includes a breadth of communicative acts, such as gossip by colleagues, gossip by other teachers, silence or un-responsiveness from students, or even the lack of keeping in touch with family members back home. All are factors that can be very chaotic for an overseas educator's mind that should be acknowledged and mentally disposed. Moreover, finding the right communicative acts to dwell on becomes critical for the mental health of the foreign teacher.

While *wabi sabi* is a positive mindset allowed from Japanese students to the ESL teacher, there are other factors that get in the way of keeping such a healthy, democratic mindset abroad. McMillan (2004) discusses the rhetorical construction of trust and how it is necessary for the context of co-teaching. It is ingrained within democratic praxis that a participatory community depends on an un-spoken trust for one another. In the analysis section of this paper, I address a case that highlights the problem of trust in a co-teaching environment. The trust issue inside of the classroom leads to the lower status teacher (the overseas teacher) ultimately not being welcomed in English classes in Japan.

DuBois' (2003) first point in Rothschild's "*Talking Race*" in *the College Classroom: The Role of Social Structures and Social Factors in Race Pedagogy*, mentions that racial identity has two features: how individuals perceive themselves and how the group perceives the individual. His compelling story reveals how one teacher introduced herself as Black (to a Black audience) when she was actually White. This consequentially evoked an emotionally negative response from the Black audience. From this story, we can understand that a satisfaction with being labeled the appropriate racial status is prevalent. As race begins as a social construction, if one violates the expectation of how someone is contained in a respective, racial status, then the confrontation of ideology starts a discussion of critical pedagogy in the classroom. When they step inside the English classroom, the ESL teacher and students are granted opportunities to step outside of each other's cultures. The classroom becomes a place for both teacher and students to confront their racially constructed identities.

hooks' (2010) offers hope in re-teaching and re-shaping pedagogy by understanding that what had been previously regarded as natural is indeed socially constructed. Moreover, the appropriateness of which students raise their hands and which students remain shy during class are norms that are produced in the first couple days of class. These norms become perpetuated throughout the semester and come into play when shy students think about raising their hands. "Bold" students may continue to raise their hands even when they are not certain, due to the fact that they had constructed this particular peer-knowing characteristic of one's identity. Similarly, shy students may hesitate to raise their hand as it may not align with norms and expectations of their identities. hooks supports this underlying act of classroom hegemony as not occurring as naturally as others may think.

ANALYSIS

Master Status

When college graduates go to Japan to teach English, they may already know that teachers are respected and revered in the country. Having this kind of cultural awareness helps the English teacher embrace his or her revered role both in and out of the classroom. If the teacher is in Japan, then he or she might be referred to as his or her first name, followed by *sensei* (先生). Etymologically, *sensei* means “teacher” and is used to refer to people who hold a special knowledge in a certain area. *Sensei* essentially means that someone is a “master” at something. For instance, both doctors and karate coaches share the common suffix, *sensei*. This code of language indicates a highly embedded system of respect and expectations that start early in the Japanese education system. The foreign teacher can also understand this social reverence by observing how people address and greet one another. If the foreign teacher has earned the respect of his or her co-workers and students, then they will be spoken of as *sensei* in conversation.

Little Girl; Big Voice

There has recently been a form of resistance among Japanese youth to find different ways of addressing their teachers. There are various suffixes to use after saying someone’s name, which indicates a level of relation, closeness, or endearment towards the other person. For instance, one’s name in Japan is commonly followed by *san*, *chan*, *kun*, *sama*, or *sensei*. Japanese youth strategically express their resistance to this linguistic protocol by adopting alternative and more familiar suffixes. I will mention one suffix in particular, which is *chan* (ちゃん). *Chan* is tagged onto the end of a person’s name that is usually female, and have close or endearing feelings towards. Rather than using the traditionally respectful word, *sensei*, Japanese students are discursively starting to address their teachers with the endearing *chan*. The student is well aware that this is not proper, but the teachers have “bought-in” to not following the old protocol, and sometimes do not correct their students’ language. A point that I draw here is that teachers may welcome the friendly and non-traditional way of being called *Yoden-chan*, or *Mary-chan*. Giroux (2010) argues that teachers are major resources for establishing conditions for education. For these reasons, he claims that teachers ultimately deserve respect, autonomy, and power. I argue that Japanese students take the rhetorical role of addressing their teachers in informal and counter-hegemonic ways.

Cutting the Contract/Loosing Face

I agree with Apple (2004) that in many cases, knowledge may be politically decided and micro-managed to the point where lesson plans feel similar to following instruction-manuals for putting mechanical parts together. However, some things are not predictable, such as how JET teachers may respond to being in a diverse environment. The JET program selects participants based on various, subjectively decided norms. These norms include the levels of how a person might be flexible, adaptable, outgoing, oriented for kids, in addition to the person’s grades and scores. I am aware of how participants are selected to “make the cut” because I help conduct JET interviews in my jurisdiction.

The JETs arrive into co-teaching classrooms somewhat naively. Since there is a lack of training or evaluation system in the JET Program about the performance of the foreign teachers, the participants become prone to frustration, anxiety, or what some may

euphemize as homesickness. As a result, these teachers vary in how their pedagogical journeys do or do not evolve. Some teachers might even consider the luck or unluckiness of assigned school and co-teachers as random. In unbearable cases, an English teacher may cut the contract and loose face within the society. This was the case for a colleague of mine from Australia who explained to me how: “I just feel like I am wasting my life away, here, in this little town. The program is just something that I don’t believe in.”

My colleague was one of my closest friends while I taught abroad. After cutting her contract and settling back home in Australia, she revealed that she happily teaches students back home. However, I still ask myself the question: Why doesn’t it (JET) work for her, but work for others? I turn to Delpritt, Watts-Taffe, and Truscott (2002) to consider the possibility of having a deeper orientation or training system for ESL teachers in the first place. I feel that having some more structured preparation and overall talk about “the job” of teaching ESL would benefit all and reduce the number of forfeited contracts.

Arnstine (1995) reminds us that students are accustomed to ways of answering questions depending on how there are culturally disposed. Questions that traveling teachers can consider become: Do the students jump in with an answer right away? Do they answer in two minutes? Do they answer next week, through e-mail? Do they contact your years later in a letter to say hello? While the teacher may risk feeling restrained, he or she should also work to compromise with those styles that had already been socially constructed by the students and culture.

While it may be true that many classes involve solving problems of a particular nature, Freire (1997) teaches us the importance of how we frame pose problems as mindful communicators. This approach may also be exercised when teaching English overseas in a Japanese (or other) context. The challenge here is how to frame a problem in a way that the student will feel comfortable, compelled, and motivated to answer. As we learned from Arnstine (1995), these students may have been disposed to different styles of thinking and answering questions. For instance, some students need heavy criticism, while others need heavy validation. Again, the ESL teacher must be perceptive to students who hold different purposes. Some students look for the shiny stickers on their papers. Some look for a smile in the hallway. Some look for heavy red marks on their papers. While having a “one size fits all” approach may seem easier for the ESL teacher, using it will undoubtedly make the lives of the students more difficult and less enjoyable. The English teacher then becomes a constant interpreter of atmosphere and comfort levels, weaving in and out of questions that she or he discovers can work while learning from trial and error, those that simply can’t. There is never rest.

Story Cards and Politics

When teaching in Japan, the opportunities of talking politics are sporadic, unpredictable, fragmented, yet incredibly important epistemological moments. Some moments in English lessons may be aided by using large, story cards, containing pictures and text. Often times, it becomes the English teacher’s role to narrate a certain story loudly, clearly, and confidently. One English lesson I taught involved a story about a mother

being separated from her baby during the night. When reading the story cards out loud, I discovered that this particular night was the one when the US bombed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Kudos to Japanese education for intersecting history in an English class to remember the lives and lessons learned from the war. Even though we do not talk about World War II on a daily basis, the lives lost are never forgotten in the Japanese education. While the teacher may feel guilt or helplessness for the political situation between Japan and the US in 1945, critical pedagogy comes into action when we become open to new ways of thinking about old issues (Carr, 2008). While the teacher may feel sadness for the loss of lives during World War II, we come to accept how people experience phenomena differently (Carr, 2008). What becomes critical is the interpretive decision for the story-card reader, on when and how to give commentary about the story of the WWII bombings. Inevitably, the students will ask their teachers direct questions about the president, war, and other political topics. When many eyes fall on the teacher for these answers, these informal questions and answers start quickly speaking for an entire nation.

Sharing the Spotlight

While the education system in Japan may be typically known for its uniformity and discipline, this is not to be mistaken for a negative system. Rather, the integrity of intelligence, and overall idea of “school”, is highly revered among the people. Since I contextualize a problem of contained pedagogy for participants teaching English overseas, these participants could further understand the democratic need to share and respect diverse audiences.. For instance, the teacher will feel restrained or contained since certain decisions do not and will never fall into their hands. Thus, these restricted teachers learn that autonomy is limited in the overseas context. If participants are fine with limited autonomy in decision-making, then they will learn how to “share the spotlight”.

In a system that operates on hard work and dedicated study, students and teachers, together, begin to naturally crave something called *wabi sabi*. Put another way, the expectations and respectful protocol reproduced by society begs the consequential act of wanting to feel a “nothingness” of tranquil and aesthetic ambience. This feeling of nothingness originates from Zen Buddhist teachings and a value for “emptiness”, or *mu* (無). These Buddhist-originating desires fit into the hustle bustle of a society like feet fit into shoes. However, it is important to remember that these beautiful moments of artful bliss, respectful conversation, and “satisfaction with the unfinished” only come with a disciplined mind and hard work. *Wabi sabi* arises from people around each other and in the presence of the ever-changing nature of the Earth. This can also set the grounds to influence an effective democracy. When students understand, accept, and embrace imperfection, an education (and moreover, societal structure) becomes much more empathetic and sympathetic. This concept warrants a regard for social support that is thought of in a way that puts people’s feelings first. Moreover, we can learn how to develop this democratic mindset by understanding why relationships uniquely flourish due to the proxemics of the island, Japan. For instance, because space is more limited in Japan than in the US, the Japanese tend to be skillful at living securely within groups and adept in deepening of interpersonal relations (Sugie, Schwalb and Schwalb, 2006, p.43).

Female Track Runners

There are times when a foreign teacher will feel the need to over-perform in his or her overseas pedagogy. When the teacher feels that she is not getting through to the audience, she just might try numerous things. Students in Japanese middle schools are commonly required to participate in extra-curricular activities after school and most of these activities involve sports. When a teacher is not getting through inside of the classroom, the faculty will indirectly, yet strongly suggest that the foreign teacher “get up and go outside with the kids”. Subsequently, English teachers may be surprised to find themselves running track after school, doing volleyball drills, or helping collect the soccer balls with the soccer team.

On one occasion, after school on the track, I was standing in line behind a few female students, eleven years of age, trying to hold a conversation in broken English and Japanese. I felt that it was my job to be continuously verbal. After a few moments of broken English conversation, one girl starts looking up and points up:

Mary: “What are you looking at?”

Young, Japanese, female track student: “Look up at the clouds.”

(A purpled pink sky secretly hovers and passes over our heads).

Mary: “Woww. You have a great eye!”

This imperfect, broken English and Japanese moment was calmed through the mere presence of nature’s beauty as well as an unspoken disposition of *wabi sabi* that is discussed by Powell (2005) and un-preached by Japanese people. It wasn’t until this young lady’s mentioning when I realized that a pink and purplish sky swirling around with white puffy clouds had been passing above our heads during track practice. *Wabi sabi* engages in democratic practice since a competitive expectation of imparting knowledge is diluted. We realize the value in a rhetorical friendship between student and teacher when we start to be wary of thinking that we, teachers, have all the knowledge that there is to give (Carr, 2008).

Wabi sabi made a constant presence for me during the real social pressures of Japanese education. On another occasion, the senior students were required to write English compositions for significant grades. Many students feared this arduous task. Nonetheless, they produced words on paper and handed them to me. Regardless of skill or the realness of making mistakes and losing face, handwritten English essays were submitted to me. I might have collected over one hundred essays in English, and made my markings to instill confidence and validation for the students’ work. Yet, this need for confidence and validation are salient within any culture and demographic of people and not specific to Japan. While students wrote on topics ranging from a family member, an after-school sport, or a favorite subject, one student named decided on the topic: *The Sky*. In *The Sky* my fifteen-year old student taught me how the stressful demand of producing a foreign language composition, inevitably graded by a native English speaker

is mitigated through an honest reflection of looking up at the sky. Uneasiness on the teacher's side was also taken away by exposing a graceful, inviting topic shared by all humans on Earth.

The mere action of *doing*, as McMillan (2004) differentiated in her article, *The Potential for Civic Learning in Higher Education: "Teaching Democracy"*, becomes a strong symbol for one's commitment to a group as well as investment in their study of the English language. After all, why should we really trust one another? In a country where a foreign teacher's taken for granted verbosity cannot always be clearly articulated, actions become more powerful. The sooner the ESL teacher realizes that actions speak louder than taken for granted words, the more non-contained his or her pedagogy will flourish to be.

Playing the Gender Game Overseas

The ESL teacher comes as an outsider to a community, and will encounter the skeptical eyes of audience members of whether or not to trust, believe or listen. Conversely, why should the foreign teacher trust in the actions of her cohort or co-workers? The following anecdote is re-interpreted from a British participant who contracted with the JET Programme for three years.

The British JET participant was the local assistant language teacher for a junior high school in Japan. The structure of a junior high school in Japan is different from the US in regards to the ages for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. After graduating from elementary school, eleven to twelve year old students enter junior high school. Junior high school consists of three grade levels. First graders in junior high School are from age eleven to twelve. Second graders are from age twelve to thirteen. Third graders are age thirteen to fifteen. As part of her job, the assistant language teacher would routinely assist in the English classes of all grades in her school. The first graders were characterized as cute, full of naivety, bright, and chatty. They have yet to become tired and cynical from the constant pressure for studying and preparing for standardized tests. The second year students were often characterized as "having the most to do", a theory, unfortunately close in truth with their jam-packed curriculums of English grammar. Finally, the "third years," were those who were expected to be able to write a composition in English, or at least confidently give a greeting in English.

The paradox of this British participant's role as an assistant language teacher (ALT) began when she was gracefully "dismissed" from the 2nd year English classes at the school she taught. In the beginning, she was casually dismissed from the lead *sensei* for the common reasoning of: "We are too busy to have you in class today. We have to do only grammar points. Sorry. No ALT today".

Others may have been more stubborn about not being "needed" but the JET participant understood and even sympathized that her presence might be bothersome or cumbersome to the purposes of English. When a native English speaker is no longer welcomed in the classroom, the reason stated was that students were "getting the grammar down without the fun presence of the assistant language teacher". Her experience of being "un-

welcomed” is evidence of her native, English voice being stripped. Giroux (2007) warns this stripping of the teacher’s voice to be a real problem happening to teachers in the field. However, when the trend of not being invited to 2nd grade classrooms was promoted to a weekly occurrence, she noticed how this was actually the subjective preference of one head *sensei* (English lessons were always taught in a co-teaching structure). After having these conversations with my colleague, I propose the question: What were the real reasons behind native English speakers not being perceived as helpful in a class about English grammar?

As I reflect on this participant’s story with the two points mentioned from Carr’s (2008), I argue that the absence of this participant’s valuable help and presence in the classroom was due to ideologically constructed values about the participant’s gender, age, and nationality. Since she was female, she was expected to show more familial and passive characteristics in her role of teaching. In addition, since she was not a native from Japan, she could not voice opinions worthy of making changes in textbooks, tests, or in some cases, classroom structure of time spent on assignments. Lastly, because she was a young teacher, she was treated as a delicate foreign object. With these social constructs, the English pedagogy for an ESL teacher becomes contained. It is crucial to remember that gender, age, and nationality are political realities that can potentially work against participants interested in practicing a critical pedagogy overseas.

IMPLICATIONS AND EPILOGUE

The lessons learned from integrating English (or any) curriculum with teachers of diverse cultural backgrounds are that these may become critical opportunities when initial respect is exchanged from host and foreign parties. A symbol of respect (language) carries the message (of willingness to collaborate) very far, thus aiding the foreign teacher to incorporate a more expressive-transitional pedagogy. This essay claims that expressive pedagogy may replace a contained pedagogy. Expressive pedagogy is a fusion of styles between one’s traditional background culture with a newly discovered culture. While the ESL teacher brings in objects, ideas, books, and narratives from the home country, a reciprocal compliment triggers students to respond with their symbolic customs, rituals, values, and beliefs. An expressive pedagogy may not work for all, and may be quickly disregarded or frustrated by notions of culture shock. For instance, an ex-JET Program participant from Australia rationalized that one of her reasons for cutting the contract with teaching English abroad was due to the fact that “Throwing money at foreigners does not work”.

Many dialectical tensions arise for the everyday work life of the foreign English teacher. For instance, learning a new language versus peaking home-country language, staying after school versus getting out of the school as soon as possible, speaking out versus holding in, comedy versus seriousness, details versus quick and easy to understand generalizations. The overseas educator must work to negotiate respectable face because the rest of the faculty knows that he or she is governmentally sponsored for internationalization. The foreign teacher, in this globalized context, becomes hired as a public, civil servant with every word, action, and conversation in the classroom and on the street being watched and evaluated.

In closing, this essay has drawn related literature from selected scholars in critical pedagogy and applied these concepts to the narratives of former ESL teachers. Moreover, this essay has discussed the cultural challenges of practicing expressive pedagogy in diverse, overseas classrooms. Next year, as more American college graduates consider overseas work, the students in Japan, China, Korea, and beyond, wait and wonder: Who will be the next civil servant?

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This essay was written in 2011 by Mary J. Eberhardinger, a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This essay focuses on critical pedagogy in a foreign context through theories and personal narratives. Correspondence for Mary J. Eberhardinger is welcome at mjeberha@uncg.edu.

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