
《研究ノート》

Incorporating critical pedagogical techniques into the Japanese English language learning classroom

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This research note will document the application of critical pedagogical techniques to the Japanese English language learning classroom, using some methods as a means of illustration. The research thus far has shown that the Japanese language learning classroom is a context which might benefit from the application of critical pedagogical techniques.

The application of critical pedagogy in Asian English language learning contexts has been well documented since critical pedagogy became a broadly accepted pedagogical approach. From the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire in the 1940s, it has evolved today to encompass a wide variety of teaching approaches. As an approach, it holds certain facts to be true: first, that education is not neutral and that in fact, all education is political. Second, it rejects the traditional form of education in schools, naming it as a type of ‘banking’ education, whereby the knowing (teacher) gives information and facts to the unknowing (students) who must then accept these as truth. Third, that this form of education enables and advances oppression of vulnerable groups and does nothing to challenge social inequalities. Finally, that another type of education is possible: one where the learners and teachers work together in a form of communicative dialogue. In this way, oppression is named and through problem-posing, learning that effects material circumstances takes place. Freire termed this realisation of the power of individuals ‘conscientização: or ‘conscientisation’. Luke and Gore (1992) point out that critical pedagogy is not a fixed set of guidelines, but rather it is adaptable to the needs and circumstances of any context (p. 7).

This research note will argue that critical pedagogy (CP), given its universal applicability, is well-suited to Asian contexts, as, unlike teaching methods such as the communicative approach, it is wholly locally dependent and is a process of negotiation between teacher and students based on the lived experiences of students. For critical pedagogy, the starting point of the language learning process is the real lives of the students. Shin and Crookes (2005) undertook a study in South Korea to explore the applicability of CP in a high school language learning context. As an exploratory

study, it found that students were able to handle the higher level thinking skills inherent in this approach. As well as this, it found that the stereotype of the 'passive' learner who does not challenge the hierarchical structure of the classroom was not supported by the data (p. 113). Another paper by Ooiwa-Yoshizawa (2012) highlighted the fact that not a lot of research has been conducted in the EFL sphere. She argues that critical pedagogy does not "neglect nor replace well-developed teaching methods... [but rather] adds critical flavour" (p. 25). Crucially, an aspect which is relevant to Japanese culture, "empowerment and the betterment of society" is mentioned as something which should be "objective goals of every classroom" (p. 27).

A small-scale study in a Japanese language learning context sought to understand whether it was possible to engage critically with the culture of the language being studied in a critical way, through the lens of a feminist critical pedagogy (Ohara, Saft and Crookes, 2001). Results showed that when given guidance in critical ways of thinking and learning, English-speaking students of Japanese were able to recognise and engage with "inconsistencies between [the teacher's] explanations and what they were seeing in the authentic materials" (Ohara, Saft and Crookes, p. 119). Through the use of Japanese advertisements as a method of studying gender in the target culture, Ohara, Saft and Crookes found that giving the learners the opportunity to take on roles and experiment with the language led to their "becoming aware of the relation between language and one important aspect of identity, namely gender" (p. 121). It is clear that adapting critical pedagogical techniques in the foreign language learning classroom can lead to desirable outcomes, both linguistically and in terms of social engagement.

Perhaps the most illuminating of examples in the Japanese context is from Sekigawa, Sugino, Mimura, & Chaikul (2007) where they incorporated critical pedagogical techniques into English language learning conversation classes. Two issues were immediately concerning to the researchers: one was resistance from students due to their familiarity with the 'banking' style of education (a traditional form of education where all knowledge comes from the teacher and is 'given' to students via passive absorption) and the other was the low language level of the students under study (p. 954). Nonetheless, through careful design and implementation of the classes, the facilitators noted that students found a voice and that they were able to think more about issues of culture. As well as this, it was noted that speaking production increased. Sekigawa, Sugino, Mimura, & Chaikul recorded numerous benefits of using critical pedagogy in the language classroom through three case studies. They pointed out that critical pedagogy enabled learners to become the type of learners "who learn and use language purposefully and as social subjects who think and act responsibly in the society" (p. 961). This is evidently an element which is applicable to many course aims at university level.

However, as Ohara Scott and Crookes pointed out, institutional constraints must always be factored into the teacher's plan at the start of a school year in order to best 'work around' departmental requirements. This note will list some of the ways critical pedagogical educators can adapt:

First, negotiation at the start of the year, and feedback throughout the year is fundamental. This can take the form of syllabus, assessment, behavioural standards or other classroom miscellany. Letting students know immediately that this is not a typical classroom whereby all rules emanate from the authority figure is a vital step in creating a critical space.

Second, 'outside' issues which are of relevance to the students and their lives should be foremost in the classroom. When following a course book, it can be difficult for students to relate to abstract topics such as 'Community' or 'Success'. Instead, bringing in texts from real issues (for example, addiction to cell phones, lack of exercise among young people) can be more motivating and lead to better outcomes, linguistically and socially.

Third, the teacher as facilitator should always strive to be kind to the students. Clegg and Rowland (2010) wrote about the importance of kindness in pedagogical practice. They note that it is "subversive of neoliberal values" and this aligns with critical pedagogy (p. 719). Practical ways of being kind to students include extra long waiting periods when students are thinking and formulating a response. Being genuinely concerned about their progress and their emotional contentedness within the class is also a way to exhibit kindness. This also ties in with Freire's (1970) notion of 'love' as a way to increase outcomes in education not based on market demands, but in terms of human development.

Finally, the use of reflective journals can be a way for students to monitor their own stages of development and learning. These journals need not be graded, but can serve as a reminder to the students the importance of viewing the learning process as a process and not something which merely can be bought or assessed in a basic way. The teacher should choose insightful questions based on the class needs.

In conclusion, further empirical research is needed into the ways in which critical pedagogy can be used in Japanese English language learning contexts. Data will be able to provide Departments with evidence that a critical approach to language learning and teaching will lead to favourable outcomes, both in terms of linguistic achievement and in the psychosocial development of the student.

References

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