

Retracing Steps and Taking New Ones: Approaching Privilege and Marginalization as Teacher and Students in a Japanese ELT Context

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Using a hybrid of autobiographical narrative and research, this paper describes my journey to teach cultural awareness and address issues of privilege and marginalization as a “white” male ELT instructor at a Japanese university. I outline helpful theoretical approaches and detail classroom assignments used to engage students and create a dialogue of cultural understanding using dialogue journal writing and class discussions that problematize identity, and highlight “Japanese privilege.” I offer analysis on the initial successes and challenges of these activities and how this process might inform my future instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching, like any profession or most lived experiences, is a journey and a process. It requires development and flexibility to change, improve, and challenge assumptions. Likewise, research is a journey that begins with questions, inquiry, results, and analysis that shape future inquiries and directions of research. Here, I endeavor to wed teaching practice, research inquiry and lived experience using narrative inquiry (Vandrick, 2009), a blend of autobiographical narrative and research. While the predominant style of qualitative and quantitative research in English Language Teaching (ELT) is derived from an applied linguistic scientific approach, “...there is another kind of truth to be obtained from narratives, stories and first-person viewpoints, which people use to construct their realities and interpret their experiences” (Casanave & Vandrick, 2003, p. 2). The purpose of my inquiry is to apprehend what factors influenced my journey, what approaches I have come to favor, and the initial results in my first attempts at a Japanese university to unearth issues of privilege and marginalization in English courses.

LIVED EXPERIENCES AND POSITIONALITY

I grew up in a small rural town in the Midwest in America. My mother is of mixed European heritage and my father is a third-generation Polish American. Though both of my parents hailed from larger industrial cities, they settled in a rural area away from extended family. I had no clear ethnic culture passed down from my parents, whether from food, language, or customs. I had little awareness of race

growing up in a predominantly white community. Children told racist jokes about blacks at school, which I knew was wrong, but at the same time I had no contact with people of color or any minorities to counteract this discourse. My first exposure to another culture outside of my small world was when I took part in a home stay exchange program through my local church. I helped host a conference for 40 junior high and high school students from northeastern Japan, who studied English but rarely conversed in it. Our interactions were limited, but my curiosity was piqued and the following year I was invited to come to Japan for two weeks, fully paid for by the sponsor. Growing up with 4 siblings and a modest income, I had never dreamed that international travel would be possible for me.

My experiences in Japan changed me forever. I found a new world of culture and language. I saw a society that operated differently than my own. When I returned to my hometown, I could never be the same. There was a world outside of my small town and I could testify to it. Japanese people were real, everyday folks, not threatening economic rivals or the nameless targets of a racial slurs. I imagined myself as an advocate for Japan against rural whites who were ignorant of other people.

In my university years I pursued Japanese language study and suddenly found myself in a diverse setting. I developed friendships with Korean and Chinese Americans and international students from a variety of countries. I had much to learn as I had no context to understand their experiences or backgrounds. In my coursework, I learned the history of oppression in America. I came to feel “white guilt,” due to my recognition of white privilege (Grzanka et al., 2018) as a white male heterosexual (and cisgender, but that was not emphasized at the time). I belonged to the oppressors though I wanted to be an ally of the oppressed. I felt the absence of any unique culture of my own, and it drove me to study Japanese by day and drop by my friend’s apartment for Chinese cooking at night. I settled on Social Studies Education for my graduate degree. The courses were highly influenced by multiculturalism. In practice that meant reading as many non-white authors as possible and developing a way to teach history that focused on minority groups. My graduate research project was to improve instruction to minority students (in retrospect however ill-defined) at a suburban school where I completed my student teaching. The subject was so sensitive that approval for my research was held up for weeks by the board of education. I had little to show for my attempt by the end, but essentially received “points for trying.” The primary focus of my education program was to get the mostly white pool of prospective teachers oriented towards teaching multicultural perspectives.

Three weeks after graduating, I boarded a plane for Japan. Social Studies teaching was my passion and practical career safety net, but what I really wanted to do was explore a future in Japan. From the multicultural fog of issues in America, I arrived in a seemingly homogenous rural town, a perfect juxtaposition of where I grew up. For 20 years I have lived a spectrum of privilege and marginalization. I experienced the frustrations of being a minority for the first time. One real estate agency told me their landlords did not rent to foreigners. At the next agency, I had to politely ask the landlord for permission to rent from him, with my Japanese

friends there to vouch for me. Similar to immigrants of other nations, my employment field is limited due to linguistic and cultural barriers. This contrasts with simultaneous privilege. As a white male, I am the essentialized and idealized “Native English Speaker” (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018), and I have benefitted from employment in this role. Although I am not allowed the same privilege as a Japanese national, I also enjoy freedom from being outside the expectations of my Japanese counterparts in terms of time commitments at work and social obligations. The expectation that I am not like everyone else allows me the options of submitting to, escaping, or even challenging social norms in Japan.

My interest in culture and identity has never died, and as I have developed as an instructor at the university level, I have tried to find ways to inject discussions on culture and diversity into curriculum. I have taught courses on Japanese culture in English to highlight cultural patterns and norms as well as minority experiences in Japan. In the past two years I have implemented regular dialogue journal writing assignments to increase student empathic skills (Andrzejewski, 2020).

In the spring of 2020, my home country was in tumult after white police officers unjustly killed black men and women, most notably George Floyd (BBC, 2020). I wanted to do something to address the injustice but herein lies a dilemma: exercising white privilege (McIntosh, 1995) I could ignore or minimize discussions of race and inequity as something that does not involve me. As an expatriate, I have an added privilege of my geographic distance from the US racial climate. In Japan, racism has become viewed as a problem that other countries deal with, not Japan. If I raise uncomfortable issues of racism in English classes, it could cause trouble, disrupting the unspoken agreement that my job is to teach communication as a safe, approachable foreigner to encourage “shy” Japanese students to come out of their shells by using English. Keeping prejudice, social justice, and identity issues invisible is the path of least resistance for me and my colleagues in our context. “It doesn’t involve me” is a paralysis affecting my students, but one I am able to easily slip in to, as well.

I cannot adequately address racism in America, and I cannot participate in a meaningful protest. However, I am a teacher. I realized it might not be effective to talk about American racism to Japanese university students, but I could do something. Injustice elsewhere is a chance to discuss local injustice. Approaching injustice is an opportunity to consider multiple perspectives and reexamine one’s own position in transcultural relations. After all, my job as an ELT professional is to acquaint students with a different language, along with diverse cultural influences and perspectives that accompany it.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Before implementing a plan in my curriculum, a theoretical approach was needed that would adequately address my teaching context, be consistent with teacher and student lived experiences, and reflect my convictions and values. The multiculturalism of the 1990’s that informed my education has major shortcomings, though heavily influential. Gallardo (2013) points out that multiculturalism

mistakenly conceptualized whiteness as one category, "...unintentionally rendering them invisible and dominant. Dominance remains dominant when it goes unexamined..." (p. 2). Multiculturalism sought to highlight marginalized minority voices but failed to examine the dominant category. As a result, like myself, those in the dominant category feel they have no culture and are left out of the discussion. Applying this to a Japanese-dominant context, highlighting minority voices and experiences risk making "Japanese" invisible as it did with "white".

Intersectionality has gained traction in multiple disciplines as a way to apprehend identity and social structures that perpetuate inequality (Case & Rios, 2017). Crenshaw (1989) popularized intersectionality with her analysis of how black women experience multiple oppressions. Intersectionality examines "...both privileged and oppressed social identities that simultaneously interact to create systematic inequalities..." (Case, 2017, p. 9) Intersectionality is an improvement on multiculturalism in that:

In pushing beyond binary, essentialist notions of identity, women of color feminism initiated a shift in paradigms, lastingly shaping the search for methodological tools that allow for "fuzzy edges" and intersections rather than depending on the creation of boundaries, making possible the exploration of commonalities while paying close attention to specific circumstances (El-Tayeb, pp. 47-48)

While the theory has merit in evaluating the complexity of privilege and marginalization, intersectional theory may be hindered by its categorical construction. Ferguson (2012) critiques that intersectionality is idealist in that: "...the essence of intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality can be found in women of color, queers of color or particular groups thereof" (p. 92). Cho (2013) contends that intersectionality fails to "conceptualize the diffuseness of power and the hybridity of identity that challenges any intersectional analysis that takes categories seriously" (p. 389). Along with hybrid identity, identities could be multiple as Werbner (2002) states in her study of British Pakistanis:

... identities constitute subjective narratives of virtue and moral commitment. The fact that a person has heterogeneous identities, a multiplicity of identities, does not imply contradiction, ambivalence or a lack of commitment, because identities matter *in context*. They are played out in different identity spaces and foregrounded oppositionally (p. 267).

Intersectionality allows for the complication of how these categories interact yet claims to know the essence of the interactions. This framework can allow for essentialization by categorizing the self vs other and use of other binaries. Using a poststructural, postmodern lens, Yazan and Rudolph (2018) state: "The essentialization of identity and experience may lead to a failure to capture the fluidity of lived privilege-marginalization, and therefore, to the outright devaluation, ignoring, invalidation or even suppression of dissenting voices" (p. 8).

Case (2017) states that intersectional pedagogy “values the voices of the marginalized and oppressed by avoiding claims of equal validity awarded to all perspectives and maintaining critical analysis of the ways power and privilege limit individual perspectives and experiences with oppression” (p. 9). Case’s statement is revealing, in that she implies that privileged voices must be devalued for the voices of the oppressed not to be. Although an improvement on multiculturalism, intersectionality makes a similar error. In seeking to understand and dismantle oppression and privilege, it creates another hierarchy by exchanging the privileged for the marginalized. In seeking to move beyond essentialized categories, it risks creating new ones.

In order to navigate the sensitivity and invisibility of culture and power, an inclusive pedagogy is needed for creating a dialogue on identity, culture, and privilege-marginalization. One way this can be realized is through “cultural humility” (Gallardo, 2013). Cultural humility is “...a lifelong process of self-reflection, self-critique, continual assessment of power imbalances, and the development of mutually respectful relationships and partnerships” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, as cited in Gallardo, 2013, p. 3). Cultural humility recognizes that learning about culture and power will be a process, therefore it is necessary to form mutual respect and inclusivity. Humility is also being aware of one’s limitations to fully comprehend the privilege, as McWhirter (2013) explains:

...privilege is multidimensional, and it is a rare person who “gets it” across all of its many dimensions. We aren’t multiculturally competent if we already know everything. If we can’t tolerate or accept our limitations, we’ll probably try to cover them up with passivity, or overwhelming goodness, or arrogance. (p. 145)

Recent intersectional scholarship is moving towards cultural humility, conceding that cultural knowledge is a process and never complete (Buchanan et al., 2020). Cultural humility provides a safe and inclusive approach to examining culture and power. I seek to open a critical, self-reflective dialogue with students, in an atmosphere of self-respect, keeping in mind my own limitations due to my positionality, privilege and marginalization. My goal is for my university students to join me in that process.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

My first steps to foster critical thinking about culture, privilege, and marginalization in my students involve a two-pronged approach: journals and class discussions. In a first year intensive English course meeting three times a week, I created one journal per week, written about my personal experiences and observations of living in Japan. Students wrote a corresponding journal detailing their thoughts and experiences about the topic, guesses about me aimed at developing empathic inference skills (Andrzejewski, 2020), and questions for me. I

responded with comments on their journals and answered their guesses and questions, starting a dialogue and providing feedback. Encouraging empathy in my students and introducing the perspective of living in Japan as a foreigner were already my goals, so it made introducing topics of cultural identity easier.

In addition to journal entries, class discussions that followed journaling provided students time to share and compare their opinions about the topics. These discussions were done in small groups, with members summarizing the main ideas discussed to the whole class afterwards. I would then lead a discussion based on the feedback.

I sought to introduce different perspectives on culture, identity, and privilege-marginalization through a few journals and discussions in particular:

Journal: “Hybrid?” (see Appendix A)

I responded to student reactions to a previous journal about cultural differences regarding time. I observed that students seemed to have conflicting values regarding time. I introduced the idea of Japan being a hybrid culture, incorporating values from other cultures that sometimes do not match.

Class Discussion: “What is Japanese?”

I presented students with a series of pictures. One set was food, the other people. I asked them to discuss which items or people were Japanese and why they thought so. After discussions in pairs, I asked for opinions on each item or person. I purposefully problematized the origin or category of most of the pictures and a discussion ensued of how we can define what is Japanese or not.

Journal: “Happy Hybrid” (see Appendix B)

Using the context of high school and the social groups that exist there, I discuss how my current life is a hybrid of different cultural practices, hybridized language and food in my home. I asked students to consider what categories we create for others and if they experienced hybridity.

Journal: “My Privilege” (see Appendix C)

Using the context of the killing of George Floyd and protests, I introduce the idea of white privilege and give examples. I ask students in what ways they are privileged as people living in Japan.

Class Discussion: “Privilege”

An extension of My Privilege, I asked students in small groups to come up with examples of privileges they have across a number of categories. The follow-up question is how they could use that privilege to help someone.

RESULTS AND REFLECTION

The journals allowed a natural way to introduce and explore topics related to culture and identity. By sharing my own life experiences and thoughts, students were open to sharing theirs. Cultural topics became an ongoing dialogue through writing and speaking interaction between teacher and student. This atmosphere provided the foundation for more difficult conversations like the problematizing of Japanese identity. Students struggled to define the borders of when things or people enter into the category of “Japanese.” Finally, I ask if I can be Japanese, having lived here longer than the students and having permanent residency. Through class

discussions and private journal questions, students wondered if I wanted to be Japanese, and what category I saw myself fitting into. In introducing my hybrid life, I asked students to consider if creating categories for people helps or hurts them. By explaining my own struggle with identity and power, I created space for students to explore it for themselves.

Unmasking privilege was more problematic. In journals and discussions, some students were able to offer examples of their economic privilege or nationality privilege. Others tended towards peripheral advantages: “Boys have an advantage because they don’t have to dry their hair as long as girls,” one student commented. Just as white privilege goes unseen and stays invisible, I expect it to be all the more difficult to expose for “Japanese” living in Japan. With one question I asked them to move their privilege into action, with similarly mixed results.

How do I continue to get students to consider their privilege? What privilege should they examine and challenge for social justice in this context? These are questions I need to explore in the future. The key will be how to challenge students to think critically: “...thinking critically allows individuals to understand the context of their own individual challenges, a necessary foundation for the development of praxis. Praxis is defined as having the power and knowledge to take action against oppression” (Gallardo, 2013, p. 7).

The importance of journals in examining culture and privilege-marginalization was twofold. First, it gave each student a voice to express a unique point of view and their development in cultural understanding. They knew they would be listened to and responded to by me as the instructor. Second, it provides an important medium for cultural humility and vulnerability. If I can model telling my story and responding with honesty, it creates a blueprint for students to do the same. One temptation for me is to turn the journal into my bitter marginalized foreigner narrative. I walk a fine line of discussing real difficulties of living in Japan with the privilege I have enjoyed and how I hope to use it to help others. The class discussions provide a counterbalance to the journals. They let students know they are not alone in their thinking, expose them to new ideas, while creating a sense that cultural humility needs to be expressed in a community. I hope to build on these activities and explore more critical engagement with my students, especially on privilege, using these two mediums.

CONCLUSION

Sharing my story, conceptual framework and classroom experience is not unlike the purpose that my journal assignments serve. Through writing about transgender transition experiences, Nordmarken (2013) states:

I expose others’ marginalizing actions, I question the located-ness of positionalities, and I make my many selves legible. I aim to build connections across difference, with you, reader, for cisgender people and for shape-shifters alike, so that we might see ourselves in each other, and that, together, we might work against injustice and distance, and toward a deeper kind of intimacy and freedom for us all. (p. 88)

Just as journals invite dialogue on a variety of issues, my hope is that ELT professionals will see themselves in this story and consider how to use their experience and position to address injustice. Teaching foreign language is about building connections across linguistic and cultural barriers, not reinforcing them through enjoying privilege or resignation into voiceless marginalization. To start a journey towards equity and justice, we need humility to say we do not know everything or how to get there. What better way to model humility than to journey with our students? If we want our students to take steps, we have to be willing to take the first one.

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APPENDIX A: “Hybrid?” Journal

Journal 7 Hybrid?

It was interesting to read your reactions to my last journal about time. Many of you understand that in Japan, the starting time is strict, but the finishing time is loose. Also, extra time is required for finishing a job or building relationships. Even though this is “Japanese” culture, most of you didn’t like this and want to have some kind of personal time that is free from commitments.

This means that there are two competing ideas or values: 1) I have obligations to give my time to others and that helps build relationships. 2) I value my own free time and should be able to choose how to spend it. When we write about cultural differences and culture shock, we easily start to think in terms of Japan vs. Foreign, or in my case, Japan vs. America. That means we think these two categories are clear (and pure?) and clearly different.

However, if many of you agree with my view of personal time what does that mean? To me, it means that you are living in a “hybrid” culture. Traditional Japanese culture values the group over the individual. Yet many have a personal sense of individual rights. Most Japanese agree that all people should have equal rights, but this idea is not originally from Japanese culture. In the same way, the idea of protecting workers from sexual harassment or power harassment is foreign (those words are English katakana words in Japanese), but becoming more accepted and common. We can see that issues like overtime, maternity leave, and workplace rules are where these hybrid ideas clash or are starting to blend together.

Do you think Japan is a hybrid culture? Do you have another idea about it?

If you are living in a hybrid culture should it change the way you think about “Japan” and “Foreign” countries?

APPENDIX B: “Happy Hybrid” Journal

Journal 8 Happy Hybrid

What “group” were you in during high school? My school had many groups: “athletes”, “popular kids”, “band kids” (marching band and brass band), “geeks”(similar to オタク) “hoods” (kids who wore all black, and usually liked to smoke after school) etc. I didn’t like that about high school. I was an athlete but that wasn’t my main identity. I had friends in the band and friends that were popular and unpopular.

When I came to Japan I became a member of another group: gaijin. Everyone who looks at me thinks or knows I am a foreigner. This makes them react to me in a variety of ways, some positive and some negative. No matter what I do, though, I can never leave the category of foreigner. People who meet me have certain expectations of me to fit that category.

Reality is more complicated. My life is very much a hybrid. I’m working at a Japanese university but I use English every day. My family lives a hybrid life but it is normal to them. My kids go to public school and speak Japanese there but English at home. Recently they are mixing them together a lot: “Today is my お当番”, my son says. My wife lived in America for 13 years, I lived here for 9 when we first met. It’s not unusual if she makes enchiladas (Google it!) and miso soup for dinner. My kids celebrate ひな祭り, 七五三, St. Patrick’s Day, and July 4th.

My life might not fit an expected category. I would rather not place myself in any category, that’s why I guess I am happy to live the hybrid life. Sometimes, though, creating categories makes me sad. It builds a wall between people. I am participating in Japanese life; could people like me ever be considered “Japanese”?

What do you think about categories we make for people? Do you have any experience with being put in a category or being a hybrid?

APPENDIX C: “My Privilege” Journal

Journal 12 My Privilege

This semester we have talked and written about culture and identity a little. We were able to learn by sharing our experiences in this journal. I have had some different ones than you as a foreigner, but we have shared many opinions in common and find out that we have similar experiences too.

This year I thought a lot about identity and my position in society and I want to invite you to think about it too. In the US recently, there have been awful cases of killing based on race; one of them being George Floyd, a black man who died from a white police officer kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes. When these things happened, we are all shocked and say it is wrong. We also want to know what we can do to change the world we live in. Many commentators said that we have to think bigger than: “I am not racist and I would never do that”. We have to think about our position in relation to others.

In the US, there is a term called “white privilege”. It means that there are many benefits to being white in America that whites never think of. White privilege is not worrying that a police officer will kill you like George Floyd (and many other cases). White privilege means you have access to a better education. It means that people will not suspect you of committing a crime, but they will suspect people of color. There are many other privileges too. I am a male and society treats me differently than a female. I am more likely to be listened to or seen as a leader than my female friends who are more qualified than me. Being a white male American English teacher means that I fit the popular and accepted image of a foreign teacher in Japan. It has probably been an advantage over other candidates from other backgrounds.

Basically, thinking about the privileges we have is not to make us proud of ourselves. Instead it makes us aware of other people who don’t share those privileges. We can be aware of how we keep power away from others who are not in the same position or look down on them. That awareness can lead us to actions where we share power with them or give them more opportunities.

It might be the first time you ever thought about it, but what privileges do you have? What privilege do you have as a Japanese person living in Japan (that a foreigner might not have)? What advantages do you have due to your family, financial situation, gender, ability, physical appearance etc.?