

# Critical consciousness raising in Japanese university EFL classes

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This paper presents methods and contextual examples that promote the raising of critical consciousness for Japanese EFL university students. The author discusses methods which aim to reduce negative student reactions to critical content, as well as specific examples of its implementation with several common themes found in Japanese university EFL curricula.

この論文は、本人という外国語としての英語学生向けの批判的な意識昂揚を図るの授業で使える方法や内容を促進します。作家は、批判的な内容にとっての否定的な反応を減る方法を説明したり、本人という外国語としての英語学のある大学のカリキュラムでよくあるテーマの実行する具体例を提出したりします。

**A** QUOTE WIDELY attributed, albeit of unknown origin, to Albert Einstein, “Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in school” is significant to language educators for two distinctly different, yet intertwining reasons. Firstly, it serves as a strong reminder of the significant social responsibility to not only effectively teach assigned subjects, but to contribute to the overall socio-cultural development of our students. Secondly, outside of any deeper thematic meaning, the choice of words may strike some of us as inappropriate. The usage of the gender-specific personal pronoun “he” may be seen as excluding females and thus be deemed derisive. Ironically, feelings of offense evoked by the word choice are likely a result of education. Certainly for myself, exposure to feminist ideologies and critical theory during my education helped to illuminate the relationship between language and socio-cultural power differentials enough to make the word choice seem inappropriate. It is this exemplary exposure to new ideas that can affect our perspective on the world around us. These educational processes or experiences that affect our perspective are often referred to as “consciousness raising”.

This paper will begin with a brief literature review of relevant theories pertaining to critical theory, consciousness raising, and critical pedagogy in Japan. It will then discuss methods that may aid in the effective presentation of material that aims to raise students’ consciousness whilst evoking minimal negative reactions. It will go on to cite several exemplary methods for consciousness raising using topics specifically geared towards Japanese EFL university students. Lastly, some limitations and critiques will be discussed.



## Literature review

### Critical theory

Critical theory was first defined by Max Horkheimer (1937) as a radical, yet democratic form of Marxian theory, which challenged positivist ideas in the social sciences (Geuss, 1981). Diverging from traditional theoretical approaches in which the goal is to observe, record, and explain, critical theory is based on the idea that all areas of the social realm should be constantly scrutinized and changed if necessary (Dahms, 2008). At its core, critical theory stresses the importance of analyzing all aspects of society through the lens of integrated social-science disciplines within a relevant historical context (Featherstone & Venn, 2006). In my own teaching context, this manifests itself as promotion of a wider variety of opinions and viewpoints on topics from numerous socio-cultural perspectives.

### Consciousness raising

The term “consciousness raising” was made popular during the feminist movement in the 1970s as a “way of understanding the female condition” (Willis, 1984). In fact, as an undergraduate, I clearly remember shouting out, “That’s ridiculous!” in a Women’s Studies class upon having a professor mischievously present the word “womyn” as an alternative to “women”. When asked why I objected, I could only come up with the knee-jerk response, “because that’s just not how it’s spelled”. While admittedly even today, due to its etymological inconsistency, many find the spelling ridiculous, others find the word to be powerful and important due to its challenge to the prominence of “man” to denote “humankind” in general. Therefore, despite the initial protests against the spelling, it succeeds as a consciousness-raising method by provoking students to think about how language usage may represent greater social inequalities in order to increase sensitivity to the power language usage holds.

In addition, it has been used in vastly different disciplines, such as in evolutionary science (Dawkins, 2007), applied linguistics (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1985), and nursing science (Henderson, 1995) as a means to promote ideas or perspectives.

### Critical pedagogy

With regard to education, consciousness raising is often brought up in the discussion of teaching approaches which are grounded in critical theory, namely, critical pedagogy (Freire, 2006). Practitioners of critical pedagogy view the educational environment as affected by socio-political agendas, which have been shaped by both history and a wide range of interest groups (Kincheloe, 2008). Thus, one goal of critical pedagogy is to illuminate the influence of dominant power groups on educational curricula. Some examples of this are how language teaching can be used to further the agenda of corporations or religious organizations of the dominant culture (Pennycook, 2001). To an even greater degree, some see teaching the language of the dominant power group as an attempt at cultural domination as it results in the devaluation and possible extinction of local languages and cultures (Canagarajah, 1999). Thus, critical pedagogy acts as a counterweight against the influence of the dominant power groups by raising students’ “critical consciousness”, by empowering and encouraging them to “read the world”, in other words, question the prevailing power hierarchies so as to reach new levels of awareness regarding power, oppression and freedom (Freire, 2005).

### Critical pedagogy and consciousness raising in Japan

As evidenced by a strong emphasis on standardized examinations and curricula, the cultural ideals of conformity and maintenance of the status quo resonate strongly in the Japanese edu-

cation system. While these ideals may be perceived as a function of social harmony, practitioners of critical pedagogy may view them as self-legitimizing ideologies (Howard, 1999), which can serve the interests of the dominant power group at the expense of others. One example of a negative effect of this emphasis on conformity is the marginalization of minority groups through the promotion of the myth that the Japanese are a homogeneous race (Uchida, Noda, Sado, & Ishiyama, 1994). While this ideology serves as both a unifying factor and a proclamation of cultural superiority (Hammond, 2006), it is also used as justification for the assimilation of other ethnic and cultural groups in Japan as a means to cover up their existence in order to maintain a façade of homogeneity (Noguchi, 2001). Therefore, one challenge for educators in Japan lies in raising the students' consciousness to diversity in Japan in order to promote greater equality, inclusion and societal access for minority groups.

## Methods of raising critical consciousness

### *Critical rapport*

In accordance with the perspective that by avoiding discourse on critical issues, one inadvertently supports the dominant power group (Kincheloe, 2008), advocates of critical pedagogy believe that educators are responsible for infusing their teaching with what Freire referred to as "radical love" by promoting the examination of injustices in order to bring about social change. One common problem educators face when introducing controversial issues, which pertain directly to a nation or culture with which the students identify, is the possibility of offending them to the point that they label the instructor as subversive, racist or simply irrelevant. This negatively affects students' motivation to participate in class, as well as openness to other critical subject matter. This may be especially pertinent when the instructor is a foreign national. Thus, the primary methodological concern is

how to approach the content in a way that does not evoke negative reactions from the students. One method is to develop a critical rapport (Stillar, 2007) with the students before approaching any content which may be taken as offensive.

Developing a critical rapport is simply a matter of how the instructor presents themselves and the order in which they choose to present critical issues. First and foremost, instructors, especially foreign nationals, are recommended to make a concerted effort to ensure that the students perceive them as unbiased, enthusiastic participants in their adopted society and as having a great affinity for the students' culture. One way to achieve this is to stay in touch with the popular culture of the students and, whenever possible, to have no qualms about being critical of things which students perceive the instructor as closely identifying with. Most importantly, it is of key importance that the instructor should begin all discussion of critical issues by first citing examples as they relate to countries other than Japan. Ideally, I recommend teachers use examples from their home nation or culture whenever possible in order to reinforce students' perception of them as unbiased critics.

### *Non-aggressive segues*

After discussing issues outside of Japan, the question remains as to how the instructor should best go about segueing into the critical issues inside Japan. If at all possible, it is advisable that the instructor not be the one to first mention controversial topics. Instead, the instructor can prompt the students to mention issues within their own culture themselves and then have them elaborate on the facts. By doing this, the students become the ones who bring up the issue and much of the tension surrounding critical discussion of it is relieved. If, however, the students do not choose to mention, or are completely ignorant of the topic, the instructor is advised to first ask the students non-aggressive questions such as, "Have you heard of...? Do you

think it is similar to...?” Moreover, once a critical topic has been brought up, it is important to stress the universality of imperfection. That is, the instructor needs to emphasize that the students, their ancestors, their country and their culture are not bad or evil in any regard, despite the presence of embarrassing historical, political or cultural issues. Making clear the fact that there is no one living today whose ancestors, culture or country did not participate in some kind of transgression may aid in alleviating defensiveness and other negative reactions from the students.

### Topics for critical consciousness raising

The students to whom I taught the following lessons were all Japanese private university students, aged between 19 and 22. The lessons took place in the core curriculum English communication, reading, writing and elective lecture series classes. The average class size was approximately 25 students whose levels ranged from high-beginner to advanced. The majority were males.

#### *Linguistic and cultural imperialism*

In my experience, Japanese students tend to take for granted the fact that English is a mandatory course in many secondary institutions and universities. In order to expose them to concepts such as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), the instructor can begin the lesson by posing a series of questions that are constructed to evoke critical thought regarding mandatory English study. For lower-level students, the questions “Why English?” and “Why not Chinese?” can be used to promote basic critical discussion on the topic of English as a lingua franca during lessons on nationality, language and/or culture. For more advanced students, one can go on to facilitate discussion on linguistic and cultural power struggles with questions such as “Who benefits the most from English as the world language?”

and “Since language and culture are connected, whose culture becomes the most important if we all must learn English?”

One topic worth considering is attitudes toward language and identity. There is a common perception of native English speakers as the ideal English teachers, despite the fact that non-native teachers, especially Japanese teachers, have first-hand learning experiences that are similar to the students’ own (Davies, 2003). Even among native teachers, the distinct lack of ethnic variation, i.e., the majority of them being white, is also a relevant topic and can serve as a segue into issues, such as discriminatory hiring practices of foreign instructors at Japanese universities, which may be of interest to the students, since it may have affected people they know personally. By discussing their attitudes toward native or non-native speakers of a language, students can become more aware of the relationship of language and power.

#### *Cultures around the world: Native peoples, castes and immigration*

In my classes, discussion on this topic usually begins by having students detail their knowledge regarding the history of native peoples in North America, focusing especially on the widespread genocide which occurred. This connects to related issues of the legacy of colonialism and the negative impact it has had on the remaining communities that exist today. From this point, I generally move on to promote student discussion regarding the existence of native peoples in Japan and any issues relating to them that may be similar to what the Native Americans have experienced. A key point in this discussion is the topic of exclusion, an example of which is the extent to which many people in Japan still do not recognize the Ainu and Ryuukyuu peoples as “real” Japanese (Siddle, 1996).

Moving on from discussion of groups which are culturally or ethnically distinct from the majority, the instructor can lead the

students to examine the practice of discrimination on the basis of family lineage. I generally begin this by promoting discussion regarding how one's place in the social hierarchy in India is decided upon at birth and then relate it to the presence of this kind of phenomenon in Japan. In my experience, of all the many times this has been discussed, only once has a student come forth and identified the *buraku* caste as similar. One way to bring this up to students is to assign them a reading or role-playing task which tells a hypothetical, yet realistic story of a couple who are prevented from marrying due to the boy's parent's investigation of his fiancée's *buraku* family background. After reading, the instructor can elicit the students' opinions on this issue. The instructor may also choose to promote discussion on how most modern Japanese engage in the practices which led the *buraku* to be labeled as "unclean" many years ago, i.e., eating meat and handling animal skins. Furthermore, the instructor can mention that discrimination still remains, as evidenced by discriminatory speech used by former Prime Minister Taro Aso, when he allegedly said, "We can't let a *buraku* become prime minister, can we?" (Yamaguchi, 2009)

### **Social issues: Hate groups, hate speech and immigration**

As a visceral and dramatic example of hate groups, the movie *American History X* (1998) clearly demonstrates how hate-fueled racism mixed with nationalism can negatively affect the life and family of an otherwise intelligent and kind individual. The movie follows the story of a young Neo-Nazi gang leader's upbringing, education, rise and eventual reckoning. For Japanese students, the movie is a shocking revelation that organized hate groups exist and have a whole litany of dogma which they use to justify their actions. If facilities to watch a movie are not available, images and information regarding these kinds of groups are readily available on the web. Upon exposing the

students to the existence of such groups in the United States, I then go on to promote discussion about the existence of similar groups in Japan. Due to the high visibility of right-wing groups and their black vans with propaganda blaring on loudspeakers, the majority of students will most likely find this familiar. In my classes, I have found the majority of students see strong correlations between the philosophies of Japanese right-wing groups and those of their American counterparts.

If one decides to show a movie such as *American History X*, undoubtedly students will be exposed to a fair amount of hate speech used by the characters who participate in the hate groups. While it is an important topic for critical consciousness raising, discussing hate speech can be a double-edged sword. It is important to impress upon the students the fact that the language we use to describe a group of people can be extremely offensive, and therefore, they should only refer to groups by titles which are acceptable to those groups. I feel it is important to warn them that mimicking the terminology they have been exposed to in class can result in disaster. One way to go about explaining the mechanics of hate speech is to look at how shortening or altering the name or title of a minority or "outside group" (Tajfel, 1970) can be seen as derisive. Examples of this include how Australian Aborigines are derisively referred to as "abos", Japanese are derisively referred to as "japs" and that "nip" is a shortened, derisive form of "Nipponese". In order to focus on the existence of hate speech in Japan, I often promote brainstorming on the topic of words for "outside" groups which are shortened in Japanese. I generally try to ensure that students gain an understanding of how the derogatory term for Koreans, "*chon*" (from *chosenjin*), and the widely used slang for foreigner, "*gaijin*" (from *gaikokujin*), use a similar technique and can offend members of those groups who hear them, regardless of how widely used they may be.

The topic of immigration also may come up when discussing the above issues due to the influx of outside groups who may

be seen as a primary target for hate groups. Both North America and Europe have a long history of immigration and both serve as excellent examples of how immigration can positively contribute to a nation's economy, politics, culture and even athletics. In my classes, I usually give a brief talk on my own family's immigration history before promoting discussion on how the contribution of immigrants continues with each successive generation. Upon completing the immigration discussion, the instructor can inquire about the students' family history and promote discussion on the origins of both their family and of the Japanese people as a whole. In my experience, the majority of students are aware of Japan's Asian heritage but many are reluctant to openly admit to it. It is at this point that the instructor can reiterate the extremely important fact that all humans originally come from the same place and, at some point in history, all humans share a common ancestor (Dawkins, 1995). Interestingly enough, in my experience, when put this way, students seem to let go of their sense of nationalism for a moment and realize, in the most literal sense, that all humans are family.

### **Topics in the news: Media bias**

It is all too often the case that people unwittingly take information they receive from the media as unbiased fact. Bias in the media can be illustrated through a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) exercise. This can be done by having the students read the same story from two media outlets and then having them discuss which article is biased towards which political ideology. In my classes, I try to first ensure the students gain a strong understanding of terminology to describe the political ideology spectrum, such as "conservative" and "liberal", as well as the various socio-economic factors which affect journalism, e.g., the possible personal influence of wealthy media moguls over news content. From there one can then go on to discuss the existence of bias in the Japanese media. The instructor may have

the students discuss the stark ideological gap between the right-leaning *Yomiuri* vs. the left-leaning *Mainichi* newspapers. Lastly, the instructor can have students analyze different newspapers for the kinds of stories each one chooses to print or ignore. One way to promote discussion is to mention the startlingly disproportionate media coverage of crimes committed by foreigners, which according to Arudo (2002), are said to be 4.87 times more likely to be covered than similar crimes by Japanese nationals.

### **Global issues: Wildlife conservation**

The topic of wildlife conservation, while generally not controversial, can become difficult when radical differences in cultural values regarding perceptions of different animals as food are discussed. Given the current political climate, I recommend the instructor take great care to make this point clear by first promoting discussion on the variety of animals that are eaten around the world which are not considered food by most Japanese students. (The American tradition of eating Rocky Mountain oysters, i.e., bull testes, and other kinds of offal is especially shocking.) In my experience, this topic works well with lower-level students when integrated into topics concerning students' favorite foods. Regardless of level, in my classes, I try to promote discussion on how differing cultural values and historical legacies are at the core of this issue. While the instructor may have his or her own opinions about the controversial Japanese practice of whale and dolphin hunting, it is advisable to express any opinions as simply a different cultural perspective and, if possible, advocate that in an ideal world, all living beings would be given respect equally.

### **Critique and discussion**

One of the most difficult problems with implementing critical pedagogy is finding a way to pitch culturally relevant content

at an appropriate language level. If done incorrectly, the curriculum may have an extra, unnecessary element of difficulty. Relating to this, Gore (1993) states that “pedagogy might be seen to restrict its audience to those readers who have the time, energy, or inclination to struggle with it (namely, other academics and graduate students; not the avowedly targeted teachers or, in many cases, undergraduate students) and, in so limiting its audience, it subsequently limits its political potential” (p. 38).

Also, in an assessment-based program, managing administrative expectations of student performance on standardized tests with teachers’ desires to raise critical consciousness is a difficult task. While it would be ideal to find a balance between the two, it may not always be possible considering the stringent assessment standards of some institutions. On top of this, creating critical content that is meaningful and pedagogically appropriate for basic/low level students can be extremely challenging. Whilst it is possible to do, educators should always keep in mind the needs and expectations of the students alongside their own.

## Conclusion

A student once approached me and let it be known that he was not happy with the content of the English class. “I am here to study English, not your opinion on culture things [sic]”, he said. The point was well taken; however, the issue of what content should be taught in its place remained. It is argued that to provide students with simply more banal exercises on food and other non-critical surface culture would itself be a political action in that it supported the status quo (Freire, 2006). I feel it is always important to remind students that agreement with the perspectives I promote is not necessary in any regard. The exposure to new perspectives by itself is one goal of critical consciousness raising. In fact, some may say that while educators have a responsibility to make their positions understand-

able to their students, they have an even greater responsibility to ensure they do not use their position of status or power to impose these positions on them (Kincheloe, 2008). But certainly, regardless of the students’ own opinions, to raise their consciousness such that they are at least, for example, able to view humanity not through the numerous, narrow distinctions they have been inundated with throughout their lives, but as a single family, separated only by distance and cultural practices, can be deeply rewarding.

## Bio data

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