

Critical self-reflection: A performative act

Keywords

narrative, self-reflection, learner of English, NNES teacher, performativity, global spread of English, identity, appropriation

Autobiographic and narrative research has recently grown in stature in the field of social sciences. Inspired by Asian TESOL researchers' critical analyses of self-stories, this paper attempts to reflect upon the author's personal history in relation to English and discuss ways in which she can position herself as both an English learner and a non-native English speaker (NNES) teacher. The self-reflection and discussion is followed by an argument for performativity, a notion drawing on poststructuralism to understand language itself and the global spread of English. This paper, itself a performative act conducted by a secondary school teacher, exemplifies the concept. The non-academic schoolteacher's very act of writing in an academic journal aims to contribute to questioning assumptions underlying the relationship between theory and practice and to reconstituting the academic fields of applied linguistics and TESOL.

近年、自伝的かつ語りを含む研究が社会科学の分野で活発になってきている。本論では、TESOLを専門とする、あるアジア人研究者が彼女たち自身の物語を素材として実施した批判的分析に着想を得て、英語にまつわる自己の歴史を振り返り、英語学習者としての、またNNESの英語教師としてのポジションナリティをどこに位置づけるのかという問題について議論する。さらに、この批判的自己内省を経て、言語そのもの、あるいは英語という言語の地球規模の広がり理解するために、ポスト構造主義の概念であるパフォーマンス性について検証する。なお、本論これ自体がある高校教師によるパフォーマンス的な実践であることに言及しておきたい。研究者ではなく、一高校教師が学術誌に投稿することを通じ、理論と実践の関係性の背後にある前提に疑問を投げかけ、その結果、応用言語学やTESOLという学問分野の再構築に貢献できることを希望している。

批判的自己内省 —パフォーマンス的な実践—

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Over the past few years, the legitimacy of autobiographic and narrative research has been increasingly acknowledged in the field of social sciences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Among recent studies based on TESOL researchers' narratives, Lin, Wang, Akamatsu and Riaz's (2002) critical analyses of self-stories are most closely related to non-native English speaker (NNES) teachers in Japan. In this study, four authors from Hong Kong, Mainland China, Japan, and Iran narrativize their personal English Language Learning (ELL) and English Language Teaching (ELT) experiences. In so doing, they managed to "problematize the discursive and institutional practices of *Othering* by deconstructing and destabilizing the dichotic categories of *native* and *non-native* speakers of English" (p. 296)¹. In other words, through their narratives, they explored ways in which they could challenge this dichotomy, gain ownership of English, and simultaneously struggle with the power of English. They accomplished all this by writing their narratives in English, an appropriation of the language that allowed them to critically discuss English problems and ELT while making their insights visible to many people around the world. In short, they strove to "use the *master's* tools to deconstruct the *master's* house" (p. 296).

In a similar manner, I will critically reflect upon my personal history with English and discuss ways I can position myself as both a learner and an NNES teacher. First, I will provide my own ELL experiences, linking them to *linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson, 1992, 1994, 2006) and *language ecology* (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996; Tsuda, 2003). I will then discuss the gaps in my language comprehension and argue for the possibil-

1 According to E. W. Said (1978), negative fixed images of the Orient have been produced by people in the West for a long time, which has contributed to a dichotomy between East and West by making people in the East *the Other*. This is often called *Othering* and is a key concept in postcolonial studies. In ELT, *Othering* may take place in the relationship between *native* and *non-native* English speaker teachers or between the former and learners.

ity of an alternative framework: *performativity* (Pennycook, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2007)². Through this process, I will simultaneously explore ways in which we can understand the global spread of English and the meanings of ELL and ELT.

Finally, I put forth this paper as a performative act conducted by a secondary school teacher. I am writing this critical self-reflection to challenge the dichotomy between theory and practice, where scholars develop theories and school-teachers only apply them. As someone coming from an NNES and non-academic perspective, I hope my very act of writing in this academic journal will call into question the binary assumption and contribute towards reconstituting the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL.

The beginning of my ELL

I was born in Japan and grew up in a family where only Japanese was spoken. Outside my family, I also had no opportunity to use languages other than Japanese. In such sociolinguistic circumstances, I began learning English as a subject at school when I was 12 years old and continued studying it through undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Majoring in English was not what I really desired to do when I graduated from secondary school, despite my deep interest in language itself and relatively good results in the subject. In those days, I applied to several universities where I could study sociology or education. However, because I failed to enter any of them, there was nothing else to do except enter the department of English at my fallback option school. I thus started university life with a sense of great disappointment.

My resistance to ELL

At my women's university, I encountered many classmates who had no hesitation in stating they

liked or loved English. Some challenged English tests such as the TOEIC to achieve high scores, while others had strong desire, or "*akogare* ... for the West, Western men, and ELL" (Piller & Takahashi, 2006, p. 60)³. As I had never felt such longing and was still in the midst of a *failure identity* (Lin et al., 2002) that had been established during the entrance examination period, I could not share their enthusiasm for English at all. In fact, to my very shame, I even refused to devote constant effort to mastering English, questioning the meaning of my belonging to the department of English. Instead of trying to improve my language skills, I began to consider seriously why people around me were eager to acquire English, why I wanted to reject it, and above all, why the foreign language that all of us in Japan had to learn at secondary school was almost always English with no other option.

Linguistic imperialism and language ecology

My interest in English from social and cultural rather than linguistic perspectives developed from reading books by Japanese scholars (Nakamura, 1980, 1989, 1993; Tsuda, 1990, 1993). Nakamura and Tsuda were two of the first researchers in Japan that problematized the global spread of English. They argued that *the hegemony of English* (Tollefson, 2000) had been perpetuated and reproduced by unequal structural relations of power between English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries as well as between English and other languages. I indirectly learned from these two scholars the notion of *English linguistic imperialism*, which is a subordinate type of linguistic imperialism. The theoretical framework of linguistic imperialism had such a great impact on my way of viewing the world in those days that I decided to go to the graduate school where Nakamura taught sociology of English and to study more closely the problems caused by the global spread of English.

In graduate school, my master's thesis critically analyzed *Englishization* (Nakamura, 1993;

2 *Performativity*, an idea derived from J. L. Austin's performative utterances, was developed by J. Butler, a leading feminist theorist. One of her main arguments is that "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). This poststructuralist idea has had a great impact on various academic fields. Pennycook adopts Butler's conception of performativity as a way "of thinking about language and identity within globalization" (Pennycook, 2007, p.13).

3 *Akogare* literally means *longing*. In their critical ethnographic study of five Japanese women in Australia, Piller and Takahashi (2006) use the word in substitution for *desire*: more specifically, Japanese women's desires for the West, Western men and ELL. I find the *akogare* discourse discussed by Piller and Takahashi very personally thought-provoking, not merely as a learner of English but also as a teacher working at a girls' school.

Tsuda, 1996; Phillipson, 2006) in Japan, exemplified by the frequent use of English and *katakana* English for names of women's magazines and lyrics of popular songs. I wrote that Englishization had been caused by the current imperialist world order, one where English was the hegemonic world language (Phillipson, 1992). Englishization represented the colonized mind of Japanese people, namely, "the mental condition where Japanese people renounce their independence, worship English and Western culture, and take pride in doing so instead of endeavoring to create their own culture" (Tsuda, 1996, p. 66, my translation). I claimed that as Japanese people we should attempt to preserve our independence or identity as well as the Japanese language. At that time, I firmly believed we should confront the threat of English linguistic imperialism. Although I did not use the term language ecology in my thesis, I adopted almost the same standpoint as Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996) and Tsuda (2003).

Self-reflection upon my master's thesis

Looking back on that thesis now, part of me feels it was very meaningful to have discussed the global spread of English in a macro-societal theoretical framework (Phillipson, 1992). It was and still may be uncommon in Japan to deal with English problems in a broader socio-political context, referring to global forces, power, and ideologies. However, another part of me has come to realize that drawing on notions of linguistic imperialism and language ecology also has some disadvantages. For example, as Pennycook (2001) points out, one of the weaknesses of the language ecology position is that it relies strongly on a notion of preservation, which can easily fall into conservatism. As a result, there is the possibility of strong nationalist protection of Japanese language and culture being mounted (Pennycook, 2007). As the title of Tsuda's 1996 book, *English Invading and Japanese Fighting Back* indicates, this position considers English only as a threat which may demolish Japanese. In other words, my thesis lacked "a sense of agency, resistance, or appropriation" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 62), overlooking the perspective that we can "use the master's tools to deconstruct the master's house" (Lin et al., 2002, p. 296).

A new framework for understanding language and identity

By stating in my thesis there was one homogeneous Japanese identity, I conveyed a very narrow viewpoint on language and identity, namely that Japanese people simply use their language because they are Japanese. However, as Pennycook (2003) argues, we should question the status of languages and identities as pre-given entities. From a post-structuralist perspective, "identity is performatively constituted by the very *expressions* that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). That is to say, "it is not that people use language varieties because of who they are, but rather that we perform who we are by (amongst other things) using varieties of language" (Pennycook, 2003, p. 528). Taking these arguments into consideration, Englishization in Japan might indicate performance of new identities. Japanese people can perform who they are by using English as well as Japanese. Lacking in my thesis was, therefore, a concept of performativity that suggested an alternative way of understanding the frequent use of English and *katakana* English as well as the global spread of English.

The notion of performativity has also affected my present relationship with ELL. Until I recognized the importance of this position, I had questioned the meaning of trying to master English and stubbornly refused to use it unless I was required. In fact, even when I had to use it, I never did so willingly. I was so heavily influenced by linguistic imperialism and language ecology that I believed I should protect my identity through the adherence to my mother tongue. However, I have realized that using English does not necessarily mean losing my identity. On the contrary, using English, particularly in writing, has provided me with the strong possibility of performing new identities and of practicing intellectual and discursive challenges (Lin et al., 2002). I would now like to continue writing in English with a view to critically discussing English problems and ELT in Japan while struggling with predominant norms of language, culture, and knowledge (Pennycook, 1999). This is one of the meanings of ELL that I have finally grasped.

Conclusion

I have reflected upon my personal history in relation to English, linking it to notions of linguistic

imperialism, language ecology, and performativity. More specifically, by looking back on my master's thesis, which was based on linguistic imperialism and language ecology, I noticed I had lacked the performativity position in my comprehension of language. As a result, I realized that although I should always be aware of macro forces when discussing the global spread of English, I also need to investigate ways in which English is used by people locally. To critically discuss English and ELT in Japan is one of my main purposes for using English. I hope through this paper I can serve as an agency of problematizing the global spread of English and of questioning assumptions naturalized in the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL.

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