Critical issues: A survey of topic popularity among university students

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This survey study investigates the possibility of mismatches between critical pedagogical initiatives and learner expectations or fields of interest. Our opinion survey of 200 first and second-year undergraduate students at two universities in western Japan, explored preferences regarding 21 discussion topics. Fourteen of the topics were related to critical sociocultural (CS) issues while seven topics were related to interpersonal and intrapersonal (IP) concerns. The principal findings of the survey showed a significant preference for IP topics over CS topics. These initial survey findings may indicate a need for critically minded pedagogues to lay more groundwork in the classroom before initiating a syllabus that focuses on CS topics. Further research will provide qualitative data to explore reasons why learners may feel an aversion to sociocultural topics for classroom discussion.

本論は、教育者の教育構想と学習者の期待もしくは興味のある分野とのミスマッチの可能性を調査す。この調査は西日本の2つの大学の1年生と2年生200人を対象に21の議論トピックに関する興味度を調査したものである。14のトピックは重大な社会文化(CS)関連問題で、7つのトピックは対人関係や個人の内面に関する(IP)問題である。調査の主要な発見事項は、学生たちがCSに関するトピックよりIP関連トピックのほうに大いなる関心を持っていることである。これらの調査結果は、教育者たちが社会文化 (CS)のトピックに重点をおくシラバスを始める前に、もっと基礎作りに力を入れる必要性があることを示しているように思う。今後の研究では、学習者たちがクラスで社会文化的な問題を議論するのを嫌う理由を調査した質的データを提供する。

O ne of the major problems facing language education professionals is determining what factors might have an effect on the acquisition of the target language. The ability to understand and to communicate the informative meaning of sentences is certainly important for overall competence. However, embedded in language learning processes are explicit and implicit social, cultural and linguistic forms that shape the broader learning environment. This is evident in terms of intercultural competence. Language is embedded in social and cultural norms. Learning a language involves more than learning specific components of grammar, style, sentence structure and pronunciation. Learners also need to learn and acquire language at a social and cultural level. In order for professionals to be able to convey concepts in the target language, they need to be able to give students a glimpse of how contrasting values and norms shape different cultures and identities.

In addition to issues of intercultural competence, educators may also seek to raise awareness of culturally sensitive issues. They need to be familiar with the prevailing sociocultural values and norms that shape students' understanding of such issues. Certainly, communicative language education should be concerned with creating conditions in the classroom that reduce inhibitions about speaking and that promote active communication experiences for all students. Nevertheless, issues of justice and equality in education should not be ignored (Pennycook, 2001) and ways should be found of combining communicative language education with promotion of social justice and equality. Perhaps the first step, is finding out if there is a disconnect

between what we as teachers want to speak about and what our students want to speak about.

The question of mismatches between pedagogical initiatives and learner expectations or interests can be approached from various perspectives. Hammond (2006) conducted a simulated racial inequality activity with her students. Her analysis of students' written reflections after the exercise found that they indicated a rejection of explicitly racist statements or behavior rather than a clear affirmation of racial diversity or increased levels of empathy. In his analysis of sociocultural barriers to Task Based Learning (TBL) in Japan, Burrow (2008) reported a divergence between the aims and strategies of TBL pedagogues and the expectations and concerns of many students. These findings prompt greater reflection by language educators with a critical pedagogical perspective.

In some cases, cultural restrictions mean that the role of the language teacher is limited to the function of increasing grammatical language skills, without giving attention to broader social or ethical dimensions. An alternative approach sees the language pedagogue as one who promotes language education whilst also promoting a more comprehensive and empathic understanding of social realities. If there is even the slightest chance that a student might feel inhibited about addressing a certain topic, then a "skills-only" approach will prohibit such topics. However, if the educator is perceived as a whole human developer then no such prohibition on potential topic choice will be made.

Critical sociocultural (CS) topics (Pennycook, 1999) direct attention to power relations of inequality in society from the point of view of those who are marginalized. CS issues can be divided between topics that have mainly global dimensions (GD topics) and those with national dimensions (ND topics) and both types are represented in this survey. CS topics can be contrasted with interpersonal and intrapersonal (IP) topics (Liaw, 2003), which focus on reflections of one's own individual tastes and attitudes, as well as one's experiences on a local level of social interaction. IP topics tend to dominate much of ESL pedagogical materials and classroom-based discussion. However, a sizeable minority of

educators and theorists incorporate CS perspectives into their curriculums and research (Ó'Móchain, 2006). This pilot study is an initial step in evaluating if the implementation of CS curricula causes a separation between the concerns of the pedagogue, and the interests of students. It is important to be aware of the extent of the challenge involved in raising interest in critical sociocultural issues if interpersonal and intrapersonal topics are clearly more popular.

Critical approaches

Much of the recent literature within the ESL field has directed attention towards critical concerns. Kachru (1996) highlights the dangers of linguistic imperialism and draws attention to implicit or explicit attitudes of racism in socio-educational contexts. Multicultural perspectives are promoted by theorists and researchers who condemn the valorization of one racial grouping or cultural identity at the expense of other marginalized identities. They also call into question the notion that all the members of a particular ethnic group or nationality have some quality or essence that makes them superior to other groups (Kubota, 1999). If these topics were explored in the Japanese sociocultural context, a wide range of equality issues could be raised regarding stigmatized groups within society. Hammond (2006) reports that many of her students seem unaware of issues of racial inequality in Japanese society, a society they often think of as homogeneous or monolithic.

A critical approach in relation to gender and sexuality issues is promoted by various researchers and pedagogues within language education (Ó'Móchain, 2006). Regarding Japanese socio-educational contexts, Nakagawa (2005) indicates that multilingualism, multiculturalism, gender equity, and polysexual perspectives have become more prominent in recent years. Exploration of these themes can elicit a wide range of responses regarding gender and sexuality related topics such as homophobia in educational contexts, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and the lack of affirmative lesbian identities within mass-media representations (Lunsing, 2001).

While critical perspectives have gained more standing in efforts to interrupt the prevalence of a wide range of hegemonic discourses and to pro-

mote awareness of critical sociocultural concerns, the question remains as to whether these concerns clash with the interests and motivations of many language learners. This survey of topic popularity is a first step in addressing these questions.

Topic preferences

Research in ESL has explored topic preferences and participation rates by students for classroom discussion. For example, the process model of L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2001) sees the action sequence of motivated behavior beginning with the individual's desires, wishes, hopes, and opportunities. Obviously, some topics will accord with individual interests more than others. Bada and Okan (2000) found that learning activities can be improved by teachers who inquire into the learning preferences of their students. In a language classroom with a communicative and theme-based orientation, an educator should ask, "What are my students interested in? What do they want to talk about? What do they not want to talk about? Am I providing the opportunities for motivated discussion in the classroom?" However, as educators who form part of institutional structures and who play a key role in creating classroom cultures, we also must ask, "Am I promoting systems of silencing and stigmatization?" "Do my classes help learners become aware of their potential to become agents of social transformation?" "Is there any acknowledgement of an ethical aspect encouraging participation in social practices outside of the classroom?"

These questions have been the impetus for this preliminary research project, which will be complemented by qualitative research data collection at a later date. Having gained a broad understanding of most student preferences, future research involves speaking with learners in open-ended discussion in order to ascertain if critical sociocultural topics are of little natural interest or if, under certain circumstances, they can form part of a motivating language curriculum.

Method

Participants

200 undergraduate students (109 female and 91 male), from two universities in western Japan, participated in the survey. All participants were from classes taught by both authors. Participants came from various academic fields such as Economics, Engineering, and Human Sciences. All participants received a survey handout asking them to rate 21 topics on a 1-5 Likert scale, with the statement, "A classmate raises this topic during a classroom discussion; I want to join the discussion." The students were also instructed that giving a score of 5 for a topic, indicated that they strongly wished to discuss it. The surveys and instructions were written in Japanese. The only directive given before distributing the questionnaires was to remind participants that we were not asking about language proficiency or how confident students felt about discussing particular topics. We were simply interested in which topics students like or dislike for classroom discussion.

Selection of topic sources

Along with academic sources already mentioned, the selection of topics for the survey drew on three non-academic sources. The first, a range of EFL/ESL teaching materials on sale in education bookstores in Japan, provided both interpersonal and intrapersonal topics as well as critical sociocultural topics for the survey. The second source consisted of reports on Japan from human rights organizations, such as those of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. A review of community articles from *The Japan Times* over the past five years constituted the third source for survey topics.

Results

An Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was used to estimate student preferences regarding CS and IP topics. In addition, the analyses included descriptive statistics such as means, minimum values and maximum values. On a scale of 1 to 5, with an intercept of 3.84 and an R-squared statistic of 0.245, the model estimates that survey questions about CS topics are preferred 1.46 less than IP issues.

Discussion

The results of the survey indicate a preference for interpersonal and intrapersonal topics over critical sociocultural topics; the regression analysis showing CS topics being scored 1.46 below IP topics on the five-point scale. The only CS topic that scored in the same range as the IP topics was "Global Warming," a topic that has received considerable attention in the popular media over the past few years. No other CS topic had a mean score over three whereas all of the IP topics scored over three.

Using a Likert-scale survey as an exclusive method of assessing a research hypothesis comes with a number of problems (Slater & Garau, 2007). Notably, when survey participants are given a limited scale and asked to quantify an opinion by numerical degree, results will frequently settle in the mid-range. This perhaps indicates more of a temporary mood of the survey takers, rather than an honest difference of opinion on a given topic.

Noting the given problems for such a survey, the authors' intent at the early stages of the research project was to conduct a general assessment of student topic preference. With the initial results indeed showing a preference for interpersonal and intrapersonal topic types, a second more in depth study—with more detailed survey questions and student interviews—is under development.

There are many reasons why learners might be reluctant to speak about critical sociocultural topics in the language classroom. Instructors who are completely unaware of this resistance to CS topics run the risk of engaging in a type of cultural imperialism by which students are subject to being positioned as unenlightened or deficient (Atkinson, 1997). Nevertheless, instructors should attempt to evaluate the degree to which discourses of racism, homophobia, masculinism, and ethnocentrism have attained hegemonic status in the particular sociocultural contexts they are embedded in (Phillipson, 1992).

Authors who articulate a psychoanalytic vocabulary in educational contexts (Bracher, 1999) suggest that the strength of individual students' ego ideals may underpin deep-seated

Table 1. Means results for 200 survey participants on a scale of 1 to 5, with a 5 indicating a strong desire to discuss a topic in class

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Topics (IP)						
Hobbies	Favorite things	Shopping	Travel	Eating out	Careers	Movies
3.71	3.84	3.1	3.6	3.05	3.27	3.58
Global Dimensions Topics (GD) CS Type Topics						
Recycling	HIV infection and AIDS	Gay marriage	Global warming	Immigration and racism	Changing sex: Transsexuals	Domestic violence
2.91	2.81	2.62	3.51	2.98	2.52	2.6
Global Dimensions Topics (GD) CS Type Topics						
Minorities in Japan (MIJ): Korean people	MIJ: Ainu people	MIJ: Burakumin people	MIJ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People	MIJ: Homeless people	Yasukuni shrine visits	World War II in Japanese textbooks
2.78	2.5	2.57	2.52	2.87	2.7	2.82

resistances to information that is emotionally or cognitively conflictive. Such information may form part of the discussion of CS topics. This is especially true when individuals are unaware that stereotypes and notions of group superiority have influenced their particular sense of self as a member of society.

With regard to issues of gender and sexuality in language research, Cameron (2005) argues that there is a gap between the complex understandings of many feminist researchers in language studies and the stereotyped notions of gender and sexuality that are dominant in popular culture. She argues that there is a need "to find ways of telling more complicated stories in ways a wider audience will find compelling" (p. 500). This survey can be seen as a first step in the process of finding ways to communicate with both students and teachers on a wide range of issues, by understanding where the greatest sensitivities lie and which topics might lend themselves towards integration into "more complicated stories."

The failure to promote such integration into educational contexts may have profound implications. In his work as a high-school teacher in Japan, Lubetsky (1998) found that the suicidal depression of one of his female students, "Kaoru," was directly related to her feelings of isolation and stigmatization as a young lesbian person in a cultural and educational context where lesbian identities were unimaginable. Members of a wide range of minority groups have similar experiences and they remind us that the critical issues of academia are truly critical in the lives of people who are subjected to prejudice or strategies of exploitation. While it may be a major challenge to combine effective language teaching with the integration of critical sociocultural topics into curriculums, the effort is worthwhile.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory survey indicate that educators who are interested in critical sociocultural topics may underestimate students' keener interest in interpersonal and intrapersonal topics. If the results are representative of widespread preferences among EFL learners in universities in Japan, they may indicate a mismatch between the concerns of critical pedagogues and the expectations of their students. There is a need for qualitative data collection and ethnographic research to engage with student concerns. Open-ended interviews could gain a deeper understanding of learners' topic preferences and motivations. Perhaps there are other CS topics that are of interest to them, or that are of interest within a different set of conditions. Perhaps greater attention needs to be paid to laying the groundwork with preparatory classroom activities before expecting students to engage with CS topics. Further research will allow for a more detailed understanding of these social realities and may encourage reflection on ways for instructors to challenge themselves as effective language teachers, and to challenge their students as responsible social agents. All of us, teachers and students alike, face a danger that Appleby (2008) refers to as that of remaining "trapped in our own cultural paradigms" (p. 10) with lost opportunities to imagine and create a better world. Grappling with the complexities of critical sociocultural topics in the classroom may form a small but significant role in this process.

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Appendix

Classroom Research Project

Dear language learner,

We are trying to evaluate what are helpful and unhelpful topics for language education classrooms. It is important for educators to know something about the topics that students find interesting and motivating along with the topics that draw out opposite reactions! We would like to gain some idea of which topics seem helpful to you and which do not. We are not asking about your speaking abilities in English. Please just think about if you want to talk about a particular topic or not.

We would appreciate it if you could participate in this survey. Your answers are anonymous and your non-participation in the survey will have no effect on your evaluation grades for this semester. The information from this survey will only be used for educational purposes. If you would like to obtain a copy of the final survey report we will provide it for you. Just contact the e-mail address given below. Please ask us if you would like a translation of the survey topics.

Here is a list of twenty-one topics. For each one, please consider the following statement:

> *"If a classmate raises this topic during a classroom discussion, I want to join the discussion."*

If you AGREE strongly with the statement please check the number five. If you DISAGREE strongly with the statement please check the number one. You can check the numbers in between to show how closely you agree or disagree with the statement. If you do not understand these instructions, please ask your teacher to explain.

Many thanks,

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Discussion Topics

Discussion Topics	Disagree	←	→	Agree	
IP Topics	1	2	3	4	5
Hobbies					
Favorite things					
Shopping					
Travel					
Eating out					
Careers					
Movies					
GD Topics	1	2	3	4	5
Recycling					
HIV infection and AIDS					
Gay marriage					
Global warming					
Immigration and racism					
Changing sex: Transsexuals					
Domestic violence					

ND Topics	1	2	3	4	5
Minorities in Japan (MIJ): Korean people					
MIJ: Ainu people					
MIJ: Burakumin people					
MIJ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People					
MIJ: Homeless people					
Yasukuni shrine visits and international relations					
Accounts of World War II in Japanese history textbooks and international relations					

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