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Greetings! For this issue, we are excited to share with you an interview with Professor Ryuko Kubota. Born and raised in Nagano, Professor Kubota taught English in junior and senior high schools in Japan before deciding to continue her studies abroad. She earned an MAT in TESOL from the School for International Training in Vermont and a Ph.D. from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She has taught at universities in both the United States and Canada. Since 2009, she has been a professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Professor Kubota regularly presents at international conferences and has published widely on topics related to second language education and critical pedagogy. She recently spoke with Colleen Dalton, a 20-year teaching veteran who is currently a Senior Assistant Professor at Shinshu University in the School of General Education. Colleen teaches Academic English and English education courses. Her research interests include critical pedagogy and L2 writing instruction. So without further ado, on to the interview!

Celebrations and Hurdles: Critical Pedagogy in the Language Classroom

An Interview with Professor Ryuko Kubota

Colleen Dalton: *Professor Kubota, I would like to begin by asking how you became interested in critical pedagogy and how you now define it.*

Ryuko Kubota: I first became interested in critical pedagogy when I was at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto where I received my Ph.D. When I was a student, I was interested in critical approaches to contrastive rhetoric, which are cross-cultural investigations of the characteristics of rhetorical organizations of texts. I started to critically look at the commonly held ideas about cultural differences in writing. Around the same time, there was a group of Ph.D. students in the program who were interested in critical pedagogy and critical issues of applied linguistics. That encouraged me to pursue critical perspectives in second language writing, and later, more broadly about issues of culture. And culture is always connected to issues of race and other social categories.

As for my definition, from a Paulo Freirean perspective, the central focus of critical pedagogy is praxis, which is critical reflection and action that can lead to social transformation. Critical reflection includes problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and practices—meaning classroom practices or social practices; questioning power and inequality with regard to gender, race, class, language, and sexuality; and practicing reflexivity, which entails how reflecting on ourselves—critically reflecting on how our thoughts and actions are ideologically situated and implicated in multilayered power relations—actually leads to social transformation.

Your interest in critical pedagogy developed in North America where economic and racial diversity and disparity seem, at least to me, more obvious and more shocking than in Japan. How does it apply to the Japanese context, in particular to the English classroom in Japan?

We defined criticality and critical reflection in terms of problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs, correct? So that can be about everything and anything. It doesn't have to be economic disparities like in other countries—although I think one in six children in Japan live in poverty, with the percentage being higher for single-parent households. And the economic gap is becoming wider and wider. There are lots of assumptions with regard to English; for example, there are beliefs that native English-speaking teachers of standardized American and British English are better teachers than other non-native or non-standard speakers of

English. So that's a belief that people have. I think it is very important to ask where that assumption comes from and whether this thinking really helps our students become effective communicators in a global society where more and more non-native speakers are interacting with each other, rather than interacting with native speakers.

These days, I do think people are more conscious of English diversity and English as a lingua franca. But in terms of the commercial sector, there is still a strong belief that the best places to learn English are inner-circle countries. Race is certainly another taken-for-granted assumption. White native-speaking teachers are thought to be more legitimate than people of color.

Yes, I have heard some teachers here in Japan say native speakers, particularly white native speakers, are part of PR. What can teachers do in the classroom to help students recognize and appreciate varieties of English?

I think it is a good idea to bring in guest speakers, and they don't have to be inner-circle English speakers. People from Singapore, the Philippines, India, or those from China, Korea, or Taiwan. We have to find ways to bring in local people for cultural exchange. This would be important especially in schools. Students must work together with peers of non-Japanese descent. It is very important for them to interact with local people from diverse backgrounds. Also, technology can allow people to interact with people from different backgrounds.

I know some university students who are interacting with Filipinos through online English learning. Students save money, but in some ways I think it might also strengthen the feeling that other varieties of English do not have the same value.

Yes, yet actually these Japanese students are probably more likely to interact with non-native speakers in the future.

I agree. But students still seem to think that studying in inner-circle countries will serve them better. Maybe it really will help their test scores. So how can English teachers adopt a critical pedagogical stance and promote World Englishes while also helping students pass tests?

I think the answer is contextual. For example, if a student is writing an academic paper for publication in an American journal, then there are certain preferred styles and the student may not be able to get the paper accepted unless those standards are observed. There is an ongoing dilemma and paradox in the field of writing research. There has been a lot of emphasis on "translanguaging" these days. More and more researchers have recognized different ways of expressing in writing, even in academic writing, and liberal-minded instructors and researchers want to embrace this diversity in English writing, which is a good thing. It resonates with World Englishes and English as a lingua franca, and really embraces diversity. But there are some stakes there, some hurdles that people all have to jump over. It is ok to celebrate diversity before this hurdle, but then in order to jump over the hurdle, you have to be able to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency that is pre-determined. It doesn't necessarily mean that it is fixed, but there are certain expectations.

So depending on the purpose and context, I think it is the responsibility of teachers to help students who are trying to jump over the hurdle. At the same time, I think this hurdle can be transformed, can become more diverse, like different heights. That should be done maybe by us—educators and researchers who are actually involved in all these research and educational activities as well as publishers and other stakeholders. So transformations should happen both bottom-up and top-down.

In recent discussions in translanguaging, multilingualism, and pluralingualism, I find it a little bit problematic in terms of not addressing real transformation. Language tests are the gatekeepers, and unless that changes, nothing will change. We have to help students pass those exams.

Recently, I read an article by Geneva Smitherman. It was an academic article in terms of content, but it was written in Black English. Using your image, I might think about it as a kind of celebration after the hurdle. But the hurdle is still there.

There has been some debate on this in the United States, particularly Nelson Flores and his colleagues. In the 1980s and 1990s, for writing research or writing pedagogies, process writing became popular. Process writing was criticized by Lisa Delpit, saying that it does not really benefit minority students who need to be taught normative ways of writing. But Flores has criticized this way of thinking. If we only teach academic English, if we only try to help students accommodate rhetorical norms, then nothing will change. Their linguistic and cultural identities will not be valued. At the same time, unless we recognize the gatekeeping functions of language and cultural expectations, we are not helping our students. So I think both are important. Encouraging the use of language and culture in the classroom is good. But at the same time, we have to help students pass high-stakes tests while we

work to change tests or maybe start talking about portfolios instead of tests. The situation of minority students in the United States and Canada might not be very different from English learners in foreign language settings.

What do you think about the methods of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in Japan? These methods have basically been developed in the West and generally benefit the West. Thinking critically, can we ask whether these methods are appropriate for the purposes and classrooms of learners from other cultures?

That's a good question that leads to the question of the purpose of learning English. I think the official purpose, according to MEXT, is to promote communication skills in English. Whereas for some students, learning English might be an opportunity to challenge themselves. They want to really try and accomplish something by getting good scores. That requires learning grammar and vocabulary. That's ok. For some students, they might want to learn English because they are interested in hip-hop or Hollywood movies or Bollywood movies. There are so many different goals and purposes and motivations. But from the official perspective of MEXT, it is to promote English language proficiency because English is important as an international language. That is the rhetoric.

In the educational context, we need to recognize individual desires and motivations, but at the same time, language education is for communication actually. To me, it is not for learning grammar. The grammar-based approach has more to do with exam systems than with communication.

Ideal language education should focus on communication in my opinion, even though it might be European-based, because people regardless of their location, use language to communicate. That is the meaning of language education.

I am comfortable with communicative classrooms, but I still wonder if students in Japan might have a double task of learning English and learning to feel comfortable in a communicative classroom. I feel as an English teacher, I don't want to put my own English and own culture onto students.

Of course, teachers bring in their own experiences and backgrounds. There are certain issues they feel more comfortable with, so I don't see every teacher to be teaching in the same way or on the same topics. But I think the basic principles of problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs; questioning power and issues related to race, gender, culture; and being self-reflective in daily practices apply to everyone. For example, all teachers should reflect on power dynamics in the classroom. We all bring something: nationality, race, gender. So we are all in a different power relationship with students. It would be different if you and I taught the same group of students. The power dynamics would be very different. In that sense we have to be mindful of the very complex power dynamics, and the question of imposition is a valid one.

Critical pedagogy can come in different forms. Freire was a literacy educator in Brazil and was concerned about the literacy problems of the peasants. He wanted to empower these people to become agents of social change. Then his ideas were imported into North America and taken up by people like Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, these white male educational philosophers, who were progressive at that time in the 1980s. They wanted to promote critical pedagogies as progressive philosophies of education. But then the way these ideas were discussed and taught in the classroom was perceived as top-down and male-dominated. Women researchers in education like Elizabeth Ellsworth, Carmen Luke, Jennifer Gore, and others critiqued this white male-dominated approach. So that's where the reflexivity comes in. Does the version of critical pedagogy that we regard as legitimate dominate others? We need to constantly exercise reflexivity.

As a final question, for those of us involved in research, could you suggest what kind of critical research might benefit language teachers and learners in Japan?

Anne Burns talks about action research. That is something that is very practical; and probably critical action research with a critical perspective, with reflexivity, about things that we have talked about. Educators must think about our privilege, and how it impacts students' perceptions about language and about us as teachers—in other words, how privilege affects power dynamics in the classroom and how students learn the language or develop certain perceptions about people and languages.

Professor Kubota, thank you very much!

Further Reading

Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (Eds.) (2009). *Race, culture, and identity in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Kubota, R., & Miller, E. R. (2017). Re-examining and re-envisioning criticality in language studies: Theories and praxis. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 14,* 129-157.