

Point to Point

Two Reactions to Susser's "EFL's Othering of Japan: Orientalism in English Language Teaching"

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Bernard Susser (1998) argues that EFL researchers are guilty of Orientalism in their depiction of Japanese students. For the framework of his critique, Susser uses Said's concept of Orientalism, which outlines various ways in which Western researchers, in their attempt to explain the Orient, have instead, dominated and restructured it. Susser claims that much research on Japanese learners of English falls into the same genre and he identifies four characteristics of Orientalism to illustrate his point: essentializing, stereotyping, representing, and othering.

Unfortunately, in choosing the Orientalist framework, Susser has given us a flawed paper. As an overreaction to legitimate concerns about stereotyping and the overwhelmingly Western-biased perspective of scholarly research, Orientalism tends to condemn legitimate tools of inquiry because of the results they have produced.

For example, to show the dangers of essentializing, Susser points to several studies that discuss tendencies towards collectivism in Japanese society. Here he does a good job of criticizing and debunking statements made without substantiation (pp. 61-63). However, Susser not only puts into doubt Japan's collective nature, he also claims that "the notion of Japan as a group-oriented society is not a useful explanation of . . . Japanese students' behavior" (p. 63). In criticizing unsubstantiated statements and giving countering evidence, Susser does us a service, but his use of Orientalism to smother all discussion about a well-substantiated cultural pattern (i.e., collective tendencies) is unjustified.

In order to understand behavioral differences among groups, researchers have identified various patterns. For example, constructs such as power distance (degree of hierarchy) (Hofstede, 1991), collectivity

(Triandis, 1995), communicative context (Hall, 1976), and time orientation (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede & Bond 1984, 1988) are tools which quantify behavior and make it accessible for analysis. However, Susser labels these tools "Orientalist" and suggests that those who call the Japanese group-oriented are stereotyping (pp. 56-57). The point here is not whether the Japanese are group-oriented. The point is that the legitimacy of the construct, (i.e., the degree of collectivity) is questioned. Even though the same construct points to individualistic tendencies in North Americans, Susser mentions little about Occidentalism.

On one hand, he asks for evidence (p. 63) to support claims which he labels as stereotyping, yet he then dismisses the means to supply this evidence (pp. 56-57). However, "the anti-Orientalist cannot have it both ways—denouncing the pursuit of distinctive characteristics as 'essentialist,' while calling for an understanding of intergroup differences" (Landes, 1998, p. 416).

In other sections, Susser again raises legitimate objections but then extrapolates these into charges of Orientalism. One example cited is an article I wrote (Stapleton, 1995) suggesting a link between Confucianism and the behavior of Japanese students. Susser raises some legitimate concerns about the extent to which Confucianism explains the behavior of Japanese students, but the bigger issue here is his objection to the mere mention of Confucianism as a means to explain and understand behavior. According to Susser, "the use of Confucianism, [is] an archetypal symbol of the Oriental Other" (p. 54). He also claims that describing Japan in Confucianist terms makes the East mysterious (and inferior). By implication, then, Eastern scholars cannot use the word "Socratic" when describing Western teaching methods. That, of course, would be making the West mysterious (and inferior) and be "Occidentalizing." The sword cuts both ways.

Susser proposes three ways to avoid Orientalizing: 1) reading more critically, 2) researching carefully, and 3) not publishing research that Orientalizes. The first two are laudable, but the third amounts to censorship. The anti-Orientalist is, in essence, against studying distinctions and "as any good comparativist knows, distinctions are the stuff of understanding" (Landes, 1998, p. 416). Although generalizing is often bad, is it not useful to look for patterns of behavior? The understanding that arises from such "Orientalizing" surely does more good than harm.

References

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Bernard Susser (1998, pp. 49-82) asserts that the "same Orientalist discourse" that Edward W. Said describes in *Orientalism* "permeates the ESL/EFL literature" on Japan (p. 50). However, Susser's essay fails to demonstrate that the discourse he presents is, in fact, the same discourse described by Said. Susser also fails to provide sufficient evidence to justify use of the word "permeates."

Susser quotes Said's capsule description of Orientalism: "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 51, my ellipsis). It would seem to follow that an ESL/EFL work on Japan is in the Orientalist tradition if it assists or is intended to assist the West in dominating, restructuring, or having authority over Japan. However, Susser uses different criteria. He says, "For our purposes, a work is in the Orientalist discourse vis à vis the Japanese learner of English if it has the following characteristics," after which he lists othering, stereotyping, representing, and essentializing (p. 51). He offers no rationale for adopting this approach other than to note that Said "mentions" these traits (p. 51). However, this is not the same as using these traits to determine whether a work is in the Orientalist discourse. Susser fails to address the question of whether the works he describes actually assist the West in achieving the goals of Orientalism—that is, dominating, restructuring, or having control over an Oriental society (in this case,

Japan). Hence, he fails to demonstrate that the discourse he describes is identical to the discourse of Said.

Further, to support the claim that a particular discourse permeates a given literature, we must tell our readers what proportion of a randomly-selected sample taken from that literature can be assigned to the discourse in question. This Susser fails to do. Instead, he merely cites approximately 40 works (by my count) that, in his view, provide “clear examples of the four major characteristics” (p. 54) of Orientalist discourse. Citing 40-odd works as examples tells us nothing about the thousand or more other works that have been published in this field; *The Language Teacher* alone has published several hundred ESL/EFL articles on Japan. Given the large number of works that have been published, we could easily find 40 or more examples that exhibit none of the traits mentioned by Susser. In determining whether Susser’s discourse “permeates” the literature, those 40 examples would be just as relevant (or irrelevant) as the examples cited by Susser.

Given Said’s definition of Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (see above), we should exercise extreme caution in claiming that the authors of ESL/EFL works on Japan are engaged in Orientalist discourse. I am not suggesting that we should abstain from making such claims, regardless of their merits; rather, I am suggesting that, if we make such claims, we should be prepared to support them with evidence more substantial than that offered in Susser’s essay.

The characteristics described by Susser—othering, stereotyping, representing, and essentializing—are endemic in bad writing regardless of whether the subject of that writing has anything to do with the Orient. There is no immediately obvious reason to assume that ESL/EFL articles on Japan are any more (or less) likely to display these defects than works in any other field. In the absence of solid evidence to the contrary, it is more plausible (and more humane) to attribute such defects to the human tendency to err than it is to assume that the works displaying these defects are part of an Orientalist discourse.