

EFL Teacher Values and Identity in Tertiary Education in Japan

Jesse Hsu

The promotion of values, both directly and indirectly, lies at the core of all education. In the discipline of EFL, in which teaching and learning is an ongoing intercultural interaction of varying and often competing worldviews, the promotion of values is inevitable. This study explores values and EFL teacher identity at a university in Japan. Transcripts from interviews with five EFL teachers and a professional development teacher discussion on critical pedagogy were analyzed in order to discern the nature of values promotion in the classroom.

Introduction

At its heart, teaching is a relational act. Beyond the diversity of teaching styles, methods, lesson-plans that teachers bring to the classroom, relationality is arguably the central core of education. Ethical questions on the macro-level such as “What is the purpose of society?”, “What is the best way to organize society?” and at the micro-level such as “How should people be treated?”, “What is the purpose of life?” are inherently voiced explicitly or implicitly in the teacher-learning process. As the answers to such questions ultimately reflect values and beliefs, it is clear that teaching is not only a relational act, but also a value-forming act.

However, in EFL education, the idea of values being a fundamental aspect of language teaching and learning is often an academic discussion at the margins.

Some scholars (Buzzelli, C., & Johnston, B., 2002; Johnston, 2003) suggest that issues of values and morality in ELT arise most centrally in the classroom interactions, in language assessment, in teacher identity (i.e. professionalism, religious beliefs), in teacher-oriented research methodologies (i.e. “action research”, “narrative inquiry), and in the politics associated with English education (i.e. empire-building, World-Englishes). Similarly, critical studies in second language learning, inspired by imminent educational theorists such as Freire (2000), Giroux (2001), and to a lesser extent Chomsky (2002), attempt to address issues of language, politics, power, and societal transformation in language education (Pennycook 2001, Norton, B., & Toohey, K., 2004). Additionally, values in language education is also featured in teaching training textbooks (Crookes, 2003) and in ongoing discussions concerning Christian teachers and academics in ELT who integrate faith with their work (Varghese & Johnston, 2007; Snow, 2004; Pennycook & Coutand-Martin, 2003).

This study’s purpose is: 1) to begin the discussion of values in EFL education in the context of Japan; and 2) to learn what values in education are important to Western EFL teachers in Japan. Though teacher interviews and one focused teacher discussion, the complex topic of values in EFL Education in Japan is explored.

Methodology

Firstly, teacher narrative inquiry through interviews was used in order to get a sense of how teacher’s identity in relation to values in education was formed. Narrative inquiry, an ethnographic form of research, takes serious the complexity of people’s personal stories and their impact on one’s identity formation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It attempts to discern meaning from personal narrative and reflection (Johnson & Golombek, 2002).

Five University EFL teachers were interviewed for about one hour on topics related to teacher narrative and values in ELT education. Most of the interviews were conducted as a series of two interviews occurring within a week of each other in order to allow for undirected reflection time to happen and also for deeper conversations within specific topics. The interviews were then transcribed and organized according to reoccurring themes.

Secondly, a professional development teacher discussion group made up of eight EFL teachers (1 teacher was also in the interview group) from the same institution met to discuss an academic article on “Critical Pedagogy” in ELT. This discussion was recorded and transcribed in order to discover further teacher attitudes towards values in ELT in Japan.

Overall, the 12 teachers involved in the interviews were from the Western countries that EFL teachers in Japan typically come from, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The teachers had various levels of EFL experience in Japan; some were in their first months teaching in Japan and others had taught in Japan for five or more years.

Formative Experiences

It is clear from the interviews that previous classroom experiences of influential teachers (for better or for worse), contributed to the teacher’s view of their current profession. One fondly remembered their primary school teacher who was very “organized”, “enthusiastic”, and “really seemed to enjoy what she did...,” and therefore “wanted to be like her” in her teaching. Another EFL teacher mentioned a teacher who was able to perceive his “passion” for languages and began to share their “experiences” as a language teacher, and later in the interview, suggests that good teachers understand “the purpose of being constructive and drawing upon

students experiences as they are happening.” It naturally follows that, to this teacher, student’s life experiences are vitally important for the learning process. A third teacher who considers that teachers should be “adult models [for students]” noted that they remembered a secondary teacher who was a negative model for them. Lastly, having “teachers that believed in me..” because they weren’t a “typical student” was an important recollection of another teacher, who previously states that they “learned to respect that everyone is special in their own way, and should be appreciated.” Certainly, the images of influential teachers from one’s past shapes the ideal teacher image of the present and the values that accompany that image.

Professionalism in EFL Teacher in Japan

Equally clear from some of the interviews and the professional development discussion is that some EFL teachers struggle with their profession’s identity and image. One teacher viewed teaching at first, as an “okay profession, but somewhere in the middle... not something to really strive for... not to be someone respectable or really amazing.” In regards to EFL teaching in Japan, this teacher commented on the lack of creativity needed for the job -- “I think my talents have to be with being creative...and seeing things from different angles, and in teaching, you don’t really use those things”-- and the uncertainty of their role as an EFL teacher in Japan -- “I don’t know, I’m just trying to teach English, that’s pretty much it.” Similarly, a first year teacher expresses confusion surrounding their job identity after their first few months of teaching EFL in Japan: “What’s my purpose of being an English teacher in Japan... to be honest I’m having a really hard time understanding the answer to those questions so I’m sort of thinking that I made the wrong choice to come here.”

The mixed motivations for being an EFL teacher are alluded to in a question brought up in the teacher discussion: “I just wonder if he’s sort of saying that...

TESOL teachers...go overseas to get a job, so they can travel?” This sentiment is echoed in the interviews by this comment:

I am basically doing this for me, its an experience I want in my life, I really don't think I'm going to make a huge impact anybody...it's a really nice thing to do for a couple of years.

It is also reflected by this opinion which most EFL teachers in Japan will not find trouble relating to:

When I'm here, there's a kind of feeling, “I went to this conference, I got published here...”, but then always when I leave Japan, it's like “Oh you're an English teacher in Japan?”, that's all you will ever will be. It's very frustrating isn't it? Here, peoples' heads get a bit swollen but in a way it motivates people to do a lot, to contribute to the field, but it's very misunderstood outside of Japan, because when you are back in [your home country] you're just an English teacher in Japan, and they're like, “Oh, I have a friend who teaches kindergarten in the countryside and you should call them”, and you're like, “I do a bit more than that...”

The professional image of EFL teachers in Japan and possibly in other cultural contexts struggles with credibility. Reasons for this certainly include one's home country's perception of the profession and the profession's connection to the motivation to travel, as indicated by some of the above comments. Equally a factor in undermining an EFL teacher in Japan's clear sense of purpose and vocational identity is Japanese students' expectations of their EFL teacher.

Student Expectations

A common theme that arose in the teacher interviews was Japanese students' expectations of University English teachers. Teachers expressed that at times

Japanese students have an expectation of foreign English teachers as being overtly friendly (“always smiling”) and an “entertainer” in the classroom. One teacher commented that perhaps students might be seeing “these classes as a way to have fun.” Another teacher mentions being surprised at the closer relationship students and teachers might have in Japan compared to the teacher’s home country which might allude again to the student expectation of a teacher being exceedingly friendly. This perception is alluded to when a different teacher mentions their idea of a good English Language teacher is “not necessarily fun and interesting...” These comments made formally in the interviews (and informally outside of interviews) are a familiar sentiment to those who work in Japan as an EFL teacher. It is however natural that student expectations of teachers would be different in a host culture compared to ones home culture. Do Japanese students, in fact, expect foreign teaching to be similar to entertaining? If the answer is indeed yes, further research that ascertains how this expectation furthers or hinders the learning process would be beneficial.

Aside from the teacher as an “entertainer”, some teachers felt that students expected them to be an “impartor of knowledge”. Japanese style teaching is well-known for its *sensei-deshi* (teacher-pupil) dynamic which assumes the teacher is an expert regarding a topic and student is not unlike an apprentice. This teacher-student dynamic may at times be transferred to the foreign English language teacher. One teacher comments:

...students come from a culture where the teacher is a transmitter of knowledge, they listen quietly, they take notes... [our institution] is very different for them. I sometimes feel that my students are looking more from me, more of an instructor role, they want to know what’s going on inside my head, you know, I’m the bearer of all knowledge.

This teacher feels the irritation of being assumed to be “the bearer of all knowledge” which creates frustration when attempting classroom activities that are create a dynamic different from the students’ expectations. Another teacher refers to his/her students taciturnity in class:

You don’t know if your directions are really working, because they all pretend, nobody really asks why, and nobody clarifies, it’s really hard..

In the end I ask, did you teach? It’s really hard to gauge how much they absorb from my lesson.

This perceived lack of verbal participation undoubtedly stems from the traditional *sensei-deshi* dynamic in which not only silence is virtuous but asking questions might be even disrespectful. In any case, a cultural disconnect does seem to occur in some of the EFL classes of the teachers interviewed in which the teachers expect a more Western dynamic of teaching-learning marked by various forms of extensive dialogue, while Japanese students are used to a more passive non-verbal style of learning.

Beyond Student Expectations

EFL teachers in the interviews experienced some frustration not only from student expectations of them, but also from societal and institutional expectations. One teacher mentions “I’m not really sure what my role is, I’m just trying to teach English, that’s pretty much it”, after lamenting that “innovation” in leadership is not valued by society. When asked about finding meaning in their job, another interviewee comments on the sense of dissonance felt when comparing the self-understanding of teaching received in graduate school training and institutional and societal expectations perceived once working in Japan:

[my purpose for teaching] is very incongruent with the purposes for seeing...by the students, by the institution, by the larger culture... I'm having...alot of uncertainty with the incongruence i feel with what I think my purpose should be based on my experience up to now and what i sense my purpose is you know from the bottom up and from the top down... I don't understand the community of university needs here...for Japanese university students in general, i don't understand the societal needs... I don't have as good sense of what [my institution] wants me to do as an English teacher while I'm here.. like these purposes are kind of fuzzy, they're unclear to me.

The sense of confusion felt by the interviewee is complicated by feeling that Japan does not properly integrate foreigners into their society.

So I don't get it... Why does Japan want me here? Why does [my institution] want me here? Why do my Japanese students want me here? It doesn't seem to me Japan has embraced foreignness, and that Japan is interested in foreignness to begin with even on a sincere sense...I think they like helping people in other countries...[but] in terms of bringing the foreigner to Japan and acknowledging the foreigners here and embracing it as part of the Japanese framework...

I really don't see that as prevalant here at all.

The difficulty for some in finding meaning and identity as an EFL teacher at in Japanese higher education is a struggle of conflicting expectations between students, institution, society, and oneself. A Japanese society that fully embraces "internationalization", "multiculturalism", and "multilingualism" would benefit all citizens and foreigners alike, including EFL teachers.

Teacher Values

Teaching English in foreign countries is inherently an exchange not exchange of language, but also of values. Crookes states: “All teachers...are involved in implementing or resisting national educational policy, and are contributing, in a small way, to the reproduction of society or to changes in society” (Crookes, 2003, pp. 94). Because foreign language education is fundamentally an interaction of different cultures, not only language learning occurs, but also values learning. In the professional development discussion analyzed for this study, the phrase, “teaching with an agenda”, is repeatedly mentioned:

Any education is fundamentally an imposition...I don't think you can teach without an agenda.

What's wrong with having an agenda if it is the right agenda?

We all have agendas without knowing we have agendas, I guess it means what you mean by agenda.

I'm trying to teach how do you express yourself, and yeah, I think it could be an agenda but...

The underlying assumption of “teaching with an agenda” is that a teacher has a particular “moral” objective when they approach their classroom. While some teachers might resist the notion of “teaching with an agenda”, clearly any teacher is bringing a set of values and beliefs into their classrooms. The remainder of the study examines the data (both the interviews and the professional discussion) to discern what values teachers involved in the study were carried in their teaching.

One value that appeared important to many teachers in both was the value of developing critical thinking. The idea of students developing critical thinking either was mentioned directly or alluded to in many of the conversations:

It's our role to raise critical thinking...

Isn't it one of the main purposes of education, where you can encourage critical thinking?

You can empower students to be more critical, without necessarily bringing in your views...

Many teachers considered critical thinking was obviously considered a priority in their teaching. This hardly surprising considering that critical thinking is major emphasis of Western countries' education systems. Chomsky reflects this attitude in this statement: "Doing things that stimulate critical analysis, self-analysis, and analysis of culture and society is very crucial" (Chomsky, 2003, pp. 388). Again, anecdotal evidence would support that many EFL teachers in Japan do make critical thinking as a part of their approach to teaching. Clearly "critical thinking" is an pervasive "agenda" for many of these teachers.

Additionally, the value of exposing students to a world outside of Japan, was stressed by numerous teachers. The following comments demonstrate this value:

They[students] haven't been exposed to other cultures and other people and if they have, it's in a really superficial way,

I wish that my role would be to help students to...examine their own identities...through meeting somebody else from...another culture,

I think a good way for...to get them to link into how things may relate to them and stuff, I do in a mystery way,..."How is your [life] in Tokyo affecting this guy in the middle of China...?"

My role is to help them to become aware of another culture outside of Japan, to get them aware of foreigners views on Japan.

Teachers in this study encouraged students to look beyond Japan, and consciously introduce them to global and societal issues. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this attitude is prevalent beyond the teachers in this study. As Japanese culture

is notoriously insular, and often lacking in awareness of other cultures beyond stereotypes, this value of EFL teachers in Japan is to be expected. The value of introducing Japanese students to issues beyond their consciousness was important to teachers in this study.

Lastly, the value of multiculturalism and tolerance was repeatedly emphasized by teachers. This value can be seen in the following statements by teachers:

I try to stress diversity or the importance of diversity...that it's actually a strength.

I try not to enforce one type of belief on students, I try to be quite open-minded.

Inclusiveness...I learned to respect that every one is special in their own way, and should be appreciated...so the idea of inclusiveness..is there is a little opportunity to bridge differences

The values of multiculturalism, tolerance, “inclusiveness” are familiar words to those brought up in western countries. These values are often repeated in recent dialogue concerning multiple cultures and religions coexisting peacefully in one society--a major concern of western societies. This concern, however, contrasts Japanese society, which tends to promote monolingualism and monoculturalism. It therefore makes sense that EFL teachers in Japan, particularly from Western countries, would make these values as part of the “agenda” they bring into the classroom.

Conclusion

EFL teachers in Japan, as articulated this study, face confounding expectations from a variety a sources which in term shape their professional identity and classroom practice. Japanese students might be hoping that their foreign teachers

to be more “entertaining” than their Japanese counterparts, while still similarly expecting the foreign teachers to be a “bearers of knowledge.” Japanese society and higher educational institutions, in turn, often do not promote a culture that fully embraces multiculturalism which hinders EFL teachers from clearly understanding Japan’s need for English. EFL teachers, in response, exert influence in the opposite way, pushing an agenda that consist of critical thinking, engagement with global/societal issues, and diversity/multiculturalism. Are these new values any better? If our students adopted the values gleaned from this study, would Japan be better for it? The transmission of values will always lie at the heart of all education, including EFL teaching. The question remains to be answered: which values are best?

Bibliography

Borg, S. (2006). The distinctive characteristics of foreign language teachers. *Language Teaching Research*, 10(1), 3-31. doi: 10.1191/1362168806lr182oa.

Buzzelli, C. (2002). *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching: Language, Power, and Culture in Classroom Interaction (Source Books on Education (RoutledgeFalmer (1st ed., p. 176). RoutledgeFalmer.*

Buzzelli, C., & Johnston, B. (2002). *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching: Language, Power, and Culture in Classroom Interaction (Source Books on Education (RoutledgeFalmer (1st ed., p. 176). RoutledgeFalmer.*

Chomsky, N. (2002). *Chomsky on Democracy and Education (1st ed., p. 496). RoutledgeFalmer.*

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (1st ed., p. 211). Jossey-Bass.

Cornwell, S., Simon-Maeda, A., & Churchill, E. (2007). Selected Research on Second-Language Teaching and Acquisition Published in Japan in the Years 2000–2006. *Language Teaching*, 40(02), 119-134. doi: 10.1017/S0261444807004156.

Crookes, G. (2003). *A Practicum in TESOL: Professional Development through Teaching Practice* (p. 318). Cambridge University Press.

Edge, J. (2003). Imperial Troopers and Servants of the Lord: A Vision of TESOL for the 21st Century. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), pp. 701-709.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th ed., p. 183). Continuum International Publishing Group.

Freire, P. (2005). *Education For Critical Consciousness* (p. 146). Continuum International Publishing Group.

Giroux, H. A. (2001). *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition Revised and Expanded Edition* (Rev Exp., p. 320). Bergin & Garvey Paperback.

Johnson, K. E., & Golombek, P. R. (2002). *Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development* (p. 224). Cambridge University Press.

Johnston, B. (2002). *Values in English Language Teaching* (1st ed., p. 192).

Lawrence Erlbaum. Kobayashi, Y. (2007). TEFL Policy as Part of Stratified Japan and Beyond. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(3), 566-571.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and Language Learning* (1st ed., p. 200). Pearson ESL.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2004). *Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning* (p. 376). Cambridge University Press.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction* (1st ed., p. 224). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Pennycook, Alstair, & Coutand-Martin, Sophie. (2003). Teaching English as a Missionary Language (TEML). *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education (forthcoming)*, 24(3).

Snow, D. (2004). Peacemaking, reconciliation, and the role of Christian English teachers in TESOL. Long Beach, CA.

Søreide, G. E. (2006). Narrative construction of teacher identity: positioning and negotiation. *Teachers and Teaching*, 12(5), 527. doi: 10.1080/13540600600832247.

Sowden, C. (2007). Culture and the 'good teacher' in the English Language classroom. *ELT J*, 61(4), 304-310. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccm049.

Tsui, A. (2007). Complexities of Identity Formation: A Narrative Inquiry of an EFL Teacher. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 657-680.

Varghese, M., & Johnston, B. (2007). Evangelical Christians and English Language Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(1), 5-31.

Zhang, Q., & Watkins, D. (2007). Conceptions of a Good Tertiary EFL Teacher in China . *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), pp. 781-790.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction* (1st ed., p. 224). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Snow, D. (2004). Peacemaking, reconciliation, and the role of Christian English teachers in TESOL. In . Long Beach, CA.

Søreide, G. E. (2006). Narrative construction of teacher identity: positioning and negotiation. *Teachers and Teaching*, 12(5), 527. doi: 10.1080/13540600600832247.

Sowden, C. (2007). Culture and the 'good teacher' in the English Language classroom. *ELT J*, 61(4), 304-310. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccm049.

Tsui, A. (2007). Complexities of Identity Formation: A Narrative Inquiry of an EFL Teacher. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 657-680.

Varghese, M., & Johnston, B. (2007). Evangelical Christians and English Language Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(1), 5-31.

Zhang, Q., & Watkins, D. (2007). Conceptions of a Good Tertiary EFL Teacher in China . *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), pp. 781-790.