

Empowerment and Feminist Critical Pedagogy : Bringing Community into the Language Classroom

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“... our imaginings are crucial starting points for making change” (Jenefsky, 1996, p. 352).

The source of action is the belief that one is capable of taking action. Having a vision, or being able to imagine one can do something, have an impact on and participate in one’s environment creatively and effectively is an essential aspect of empowerment.

In this paper I will discuss my attempts to foster an empowering community through content choice and classroom practice in my English language classes at Keisen University. The discussion on content will largely be based on a module for a second-year Communicative English course. Proponents of empowerment theory recognize that belief in one’s efficacy and competence is critical for individuals to achieve social justice and change. The theory of empowerment is the foundation of feminist and critical pedagogies. Informed by these pedagogical practices, my aim is to provide students with the tools that can enable them to empower themselves and be effective and creative participants in their environments (Freire, 1998 ; hooks, 1994).

Feminist critical pedagogy, developed as a corrective to the lack of gender analysis within works of critical pedagogy (Jenefsky, 1996), is receiving a growing interest among educators of EFL in Japan and elsewhere (Fuji-

mura-Fanselow, 1996; McMahonill, 1998a; McMahonill, 1998b; McMahonill & Reekie, 1996). There are numerous variations but generally feminist and critical pedagogies are based on a philosophy of education where curricula, methodologies and policies are designed to promote students' critical thinking and to empower them to become agents of social change (Jenefsky, 1996). Feminist critical pedagogy departs from critical pedagogy in that gender is added to critical pedagogy's race and class categories of analysis (Jenefsky, 1996). Thus, gender inequality as a focus for critical inquiry is fundamental to a feminist critical pedagogy.

In the following section, I will discuss the theoretical foundation of feminist critical pedagogy, namely empowerment, in more detail. Under the section entitled "Integrating theory and practice", I explain how the choice of using English language newsletters published by women's NGO's, grassroots organizations, and United Nations materials provides empowering content. Following this, I discuss practices and methodology which promote empowering classrooms.

Theoretical Foundation

What is Empowerment?

"Community organization," "mutual support," "natural support systems," "neighborhood participation," "personal efficacy," "competence," "self-sufficiency", "coping skills," and "self-esteem" are all concepts popularly thought of as synonymous with empowerment (Kieffer, 1984). Finding a paucity of research on the dynamics and developmental processes involved in individual empowerment, Kieffer (1984) studied the patterns and processes of the transition from powerlessness to socio-political empowerment. He found that the most meaningful definition of empowerment encompasses the area in which the above concepts intersect. Other key concepts of empowerment that have been identified by theorists, clinicians, and mental health consumers are hope,

choice, self-respect, dignity, self-confidence, interdependence, community activism, solidarity, consciousness-raising, critical inquiry and knowledge (Deegan, 1990; Licuanan, 1999; Rappaport, 1987; Rose & Black, 1986; Szsaz, 1970; Weitz, 1983).

These key concepts clearly reveal two aspects of empowerment: internal or psychological/affective and cognitive and external or behavioral. Another critical component of empowerment in addition to this subjective dimension is the objective level. Rappaport (1987) describes these two dimensions as: 1) a subjective level- - a psychological sense of personal control and/or influence / power (which potentially translates into behavior/action) and 2) an objective level- - actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. Fundamental to an empowerment model for social action and community development is the assumption that one of the most critical needs of human beings is the need to be a creative and effective participant in one's environment (Rose & Black, 1986). In order for an individual to participate creatively and effectively in their environment, the above two dimensions of empowerment are prerequisites.

Originating from the "social action" ideology of the 1960's and the "self-help" movements of the 1970's (Kieffer, 1984), the essence of empowerment is related to power and lack of power (Pinderhughes, 1983). But power in this sense is not "power over" or domination but rather self-actualizing power and socio-political agency. This kind of power, liberating to the human spirit, can encourage a commitment to social justice.

Paulo Freire, an educator, whose work in the field of adult literacy in Brazil has been influential in developing critical pedagogies in classrooms the world over has also informed the work of many people involved in social helping relationships where empowerment is the goal. His words below demonstrate the potential of self-actualizing power:

A humanizing education is the path through which men and women can

become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, *but also the needs and aspirations of others*. (p. xiii, cited in the foreward by D. Macedo & A. Freire in Freire, 1998) (emphasis added)

Critical Inquiry

Central to empowerment theory is critical inquiry into the daily concrete realities of one's life. Being conscious of our presence in the world by connecting the subjective conditions with objective conditions of our lives is part of the critical inquiry process. Freire (1968) has said that objects are known and acted upon; subjects know and act. In other words, responsible subjects continue to know their social world and act to transform it; they are dynamic participants, creators, producers. One of the goals of empowerment is to achieve transformation of the individual from object to subject, creator, or participant. Everyone even the most disempowered, has the capacity to become subjects actively transforming their social world.

Problematization and Praxis

Keiffer (1984) identified three major developmental stages of empowerment or "participatory competence":

- (a) development of a more positive self-concept, or sense of self-competence,
- (b) construction of more critical or analytical understanding of the surrounding social and political environment, and
- (c) cultivation of individual and collective resources of social and political action. (p. 31)

Problematization refers to the construction of a critical understanding of our social / political / historical contexts- - the objective conditions of oppression (i. e. lack of power) and linking them to the subjective conditions- - development of a more positive self-concept which potentially leads us to a "commitment" toward action or changing those oppressive conditions. Praxis is action based on this process of reflection. The above developmental stages of

empowerment are not necessarily linear. The process of linking the subjective with the objective conditions of life can result in a more positive self-concept as we become conscious of the internalization of dominant values. Similarly, as we become active collectively and develop a sense of solidarity our sense of self-competence or our sense of ourselves as “subjects” becomes enhanced. One of the goals of empowerment is to enable us to recognize and validate the skills and power that we do have to work for social change both individually and collectively.

Integrating Theory and Practice

I. Empowering Content - Models of Citizen Empowerment: NGO's - Bringing Community into the Classroom

It is hard to work for something that you cannot imagine. It is not enough to know what you do not want... We need to bring new circumstances into being. The first step in this creative process is being able to imagine vividly the desired result, as if it had already happened. This is the envisioning process. (Shields, 1994, p. 24)

Envisioning

Shields (1994) points out in her book, *In the tiger's mouth: An empowerment guide for social action*, how examples of real people working for social justice can provide inspiration for each of us to first envision better things and then attempt to translate the vision into reality. However, rather than being exposed to examples of citizen empowerment and successful action, we are inundated with the myriad images of powerlessness and disempowerment presented by the mainstream media. Women and girls are shown on average half as often as men and when they are shown images of them as vulnerable, insecure, weak, dependent and as victims or sex objects prevail (Faludi, 1992; Suzuki, 1995). Similarly, gender-role stereotypes for males are also pervasive

in popular culture where they are often depicted as cool, tough, aggressive, violent, and “anti-empathic” (Gardiner, 2000).

With the increasing adoption of content-based EFL instruction at the university-level (Brinton et al., 1989; Swain & Miccoli; 1994; Soga, 1998; Wringer, 1998), educators have the liberty to select, develop, and adapt authentic materials for their courses. As such, instructors can offset the imbalance of negative images in the mainstream media and create an atmosphere of hope for citizen empowerment, social justice and equality by providing our students with access to alternative sources of information about empowered communities and positive role models through curriculum content.

An excellent source for empowering curriculum content is English language newsletters/videos published by women’s groups, grassroots organizations, NGO’s from around the world and the United Nations. I use these materials to introduce students to some key issues of concern to women worldwide as outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), a document which resulted from The 1995 United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women and NGO Forum.

Many of these resources can be found at the Forum Yokohama and the National Women’s Education Centre, libraries. Also available is contact information for these women’s groups and NGO’s including email addresses and websites which are given to the students so that they may do further research independently and learn that this kind of information is accessible to everyone; an empowering discovery in itself. Students are also referred to these two centres as well as others to increase their awareness of community resources and organizations in Japan.

As authentic materials these newsletters and videos provide examples of real women cooperating to achieve real goals without being inaccessible to the student of English. For articles with a great deal of difficult vocabulary, the students are provided with a list of Japanese translations. Reading newsletters

published by women's groups provides a unique opportunity to learn about how women in a variety of countries see their situation and what they are doing to improve it. Through class discussions and related activities students can make connections between issues of concern to women in other countries, such as violence against women, gender roles in the family and eating disorders, for example, with what they know about women's experiences in Japan.

The successful action of obtaining "actual social influence, political power, and/or legal rights" by these NGO women provides concrete examples of empowerment on an objective level. My hope is that the exposure to these concrete, real-life models or "visions" of successful empowerment will promote empowerment on a subjective level as well if students believe that they, too, are capable of such action.

Some examples of empowering articles I've used from these newsletters and other resources are shown in a sample course syllabus in Appendix A.

Critical Inquiry

The above course materials and topics are conducive to providing opportunities for critical inquiry into the students' own daily lives as well as into women's lives globally.

Consciousness-raising activities [see Appendix A-"Sex and Gender: What's the Difference?"] are also a regular part of class work.

Introducing students to community resources and actually taking the class to the community is another way to promote critical inquiry into our daily lives and to introduce students to concrete examples of what various women's groups and NGO's are doing to empower themselves. For example, as many of my students are writing research papers on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery, and as this is one of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action that the class has been studying, we have decided to take our class to the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery this coming December.

II. Empowering Classrooms- Creating Community in the Classroom

Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community (hooks, 1994, p. 8).

Sharing responsibility is an integral component of an empowerment approach. I find the words of bell hooks (1994), a feminist educator influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, to be quite liberating in this regard. Describing a class in which there were a number of students who were “resisting” learning a new pedagogical process, she writes: “More than any other class I had taught, this one compelled me to abandon the sense that the professor could, by sheer strength of will and desire, make the classroom an exciting learning community” (p.9). hooks argues that creating an engaging learning community, making a class “work” is *everyone’s* responsibility.

As feminist educators have long recognized, it is not enough to simply change curriculums to create a liberatory or empowering classroom ; we must also change the way we teach what we teach (Fujumura-Fanselow, 1996 ; hooks, 1994). In order to do this we need to increase our own awareness about what we do in the classroom. Underhill (1998) writes about the importance of educators reflecting upon their practice starting with examining who makes what decisions in the classroom and how power is distributed. He suggests a good exercise to increase our awareness of how power is distributed in the classroom is to first list all the conscious decisions we make while becoming cognizant of the decisions that we make unconsciously. After completing this process, he then examines which decisions can be made in cooperation with the learners and which ones can only be made by the instructor. The next step in this process involves exploring of the decisions that he could perhaps share with the learners, which does he feel more reluctant to share and which does he feel less reluctant to share. Finally, he asks himself how is he to share the decisions

he usually makes himself.

The question of how to share decisions is an important one for the practice of sharing power involves a shift in paradigms for both teachers and students. This shift, hooks (1994) points out, is equally difficult for both professors and students. Thus, we need to respect that difficulty and as Underhill (1998) notes “start from where the students are”. He adds, “[i]t is simply another act of tyranny to impose self-direction on someone who at the moment is not ready, or not prepared, or not experienced enough to make sense of the challenge” (p. 18).

Re- structuring the Setting

One of the easiest first steps in attempting to break down traditional power relations and interactions in the classroom can be restructuring the physical environment. A very simple way of acknowledging each student’s presence, which enables everyone in the classroom (students and instructors) to see each other’s faces, is to arrange the desks so that they form a rectangle. In this way, the instructor is not positioned at a podium or at the front of the classroom thus reducing the hierarchical stance of instructor vis- á- vis students (hooks, 1994). I have found that initially, students appear somewhat reluctant and uncomfortable with this arrangement perhaps because they cannot “hide” or “become invisible” - postures to which they have become all too accustomed, rarely being encouraged to be active participants in conventional classrooms (Fujimura- Fanselow, 1995 ; Fujimura- Fanselow, 1996 ; hooks, 1994). It is important to share our understanding of practice with our students. This is consistent with encouraging a dialectical exchange of ideas, an important phase in empowerment. Informing students of goals and the rationale of various tasks /activities can increase their understanding of how the tasks /activities are benefitting both their language learning and learning in general and thus they are not left confused or bewildered about how a particular activity is relevant.

Reciprocity and Collaboration

Another very important component of empowerment theory is the necessity for reciprocal relationships. bell hooks (1994), argues that teaching and learning is a reciprocal process for teachers and students and that professors should also be empowered by their interactions with students :

[Yet,] the classroom should be a space where we're all in power in different ways... In my books I try to show how much my work is influenced by what students say in the classroom, what they do, what they express to me. Along with them I grow intellectually, developing sharper understandings of how to share knowledge and what to do in my participatory role with students. This is one of the primary differences between education as a practice of freedom and the conservative banking system which encourages professors to believe deep down in the core of their being that they have nothing to learn from their students. (p. 153)

Educators can attempt to create these types of relationships with students in the classroom by first carefully examining and reflecting on their interactions with students and then adjusting them wherever possible to promote more egalitarian interactions. Having students write Self- and Course/Instructor- Evaluations through journals is one very effective way to reflect on our classroom practices and to create opportunities for students to “come to voice”. For example, I ask my students to critique the course content i.e. articles, videos, etc. and class activities by writing what they like /dislike, find helpful / not helpful and why and what they would like to change, suggestions for activities/interactions that they would find more helpful, in addition to any comments/questions they have about the class topic. I ask students to hand in their journals every month so that I can implement their suggestions. I summarize their comments to the class so that their perceptions can be shared. In this way, students who find it difficult to express their opinions and perceptions verbally can also be heard. Through journal writing and my written responses,

we can communicate with each other which is difficult to do every class due to the number of students.

Implementing what the students say in their journals reveals that the teacher can learn from students and is important in order to diminish hierarchical barriers and promote a collaborative learning atmosphere.

Apart from the journals, self-expression and communication of complex thoughts and opinions in the L2 language can often be difficult for students. This is a problem with which I often struggle-i. e. how do we as language educators diminish the power differential between ourselves, as instructors whose native language is the medium for communication, and students who are learning the language and are unable to communicate or express what they want to express? Students are allowed to use some Japanese in both class and group discussions, to teach each other language structures and to be able to express opinions and ideas freely. If possible another student translates into English what a particular student has said in Japanese. “Indeed, the first step in overcoming oppression is expression. That is why it is so important to listen to people and allow them to find their own words in order to name their own world” (Deegan, 1990, p. 306). Allowing some communication in the student’s native language is another way to avoid reifying practices that reinforce Western cultural imperialism in the classroom.

Respecting Students’ Lived Experiences

Citing Andrade (1998), Hones (1999) suggests that students’ own experiences can provide “authentic texts and contexts” such as audio-taped or live interviews with family and community members on issues of social justice. One assignment I have given students is to interview three women of different generations in their family and/or community about their feelings and opinions of how gender roles have affected their lives. Students report that they come to learn many new things about their mothers, grandmothers, etc. through this assignment. Such activities promote students’ critical inquiry into their own

lives and help them make connections with women's lives globally through studying women's situations in other countries.

I think the following students' words reveal the empowering potential of the course. The following entry is a reaction to a video about the 1995 UN Beijing World Conference on Women and NGO Forum.

...I thought we should fight against distinction. And I thought women's cooperative power was wonderful. I was impressed with cooperating women over the race and the nationality. I thought without women's power, the world could not change. I encouraged women were active in various field. *I thought I could do anything. I want to think what I can do from now on...*" (emphasis added).

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Appendix A : Sample Course Syllabus for the first 13- week semester

Wk	Unit /Topic	Resources / Activities
1	Beyond Beijing Course Introduction - What is the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women / NGO Forum ? - What is the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) ?	- Course Introduction - UN Fourth World Conference on Women / NGO Forum, Beijing (NHK) video (in Japanese) [students watch the video and write a summary and reaction in English for homework]
2	The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)	- Introduce BPFA Handout of 12 critical areas of concern (with Japanese translation) - video of CNN news clips introducing topics which are related to some of the 12 critical areas of concern.

3	<p>BPFA - - Section K - - Women and the Environment “Tree Hugger Movement in the Himalayas” “Japanese Women’s Groups Environmental activities”</p> <p><u>Keyword</u> Sustainable Development</p>	<p>- “Hugging Trees - - Women’s Power” <i>Scottish Education and Action for Development (SEAD)</i></p> <p>- Matsui, Y., Kaji, E., Arimura, J. (1996). How to integrate feminism and ecology : Confronting the environmental crisis. <i>Women’s Asia 21 : Voices from Japan, 2, 20- 24.</i></p>
4	<p>BPFA - - K - - Women and the Environment “The Green Belt Movement in Kenya”</p>	<p>- Music : <i>Rape of the World</i> by Tracy Chapman - listening cloze- gap exercise</p> <p>- “Greening Takes Root” from <i>ISIS International Women in Action newsletter</i> (Manila and Uganda)</p>
5	<p>Workshop - - Sex and Gender - - What is the Difference ?</p> <p><u>Keywords</u> Sex Gender Gender Role</p>	<p>- On the board the instructor writes a column for ‘Sex’ and one for ‘Gender’.</p> <p>- Students are asked to think of words related to sex and the instructor writes them on the board. Students are then asked to think of other words for gender. In groups students finish the sentences with 5 examples “Because I am a woman, I can...” and “Because I am a woman, I can’t...” These are then put on the board under the appropriate column as related to ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ or ‘?’</p> <p>- This activity helps raise student awareness of the influences of culture and socialization on gender. Students are asked to write what they learned from this activity in their journals. In pairs students read journal entries to each other practicing speaking points introduced previously.</p>

6	<p>BPFA -- J -- Women and the Media</p> <p><u>Keywords</u> Media Literacy Stereotyped Gender Roles Non - stereotyped Gender Roles</p>	<p>- Suzuki, Midori F. (1995). Women and television : Portrayal of women in the mass media. In K. Fujimura- Fanselow and A. Kameda (Eds.), <i>Japanese women : New feminist perspectives on the past, present, and future</i>. New York : The Feminist Press, 75- 90.</p> <p>- short Canadian video produced by Toronto Women in Television and Film and Mediawatch : "Get the picture : The Portrayal of Women in the Media" (Jananese subtitles)</p> <p>- Michielsens, M. (Producer). (1995). <i>Image by Image</i> [videotape]. Belgium : Vrowbeeld. (English subtitles) This video shows changing perspectives in television and advertising (non- stereotyped gender roles). Compare MediaWatch (NGO) in Canada with Forum for Citizens' Television (NGO) in Japan</p>
7	<p>BPFA -- D -- Violence Against Women</p> <p><u>Keywords</u> Violence Against Women (VAW) Domestic Violence (DV) Sexual Harassment</p>	<p>- <i>Yokohama Women's Association for Communication and Networking</i> newsletter article reporting research on VAW in Japan</p> <p>- "Domestic Violence in Peru" from <i>WOMEN IN ACTION</i> newsletter</p> <p>- "Violence Against Women : A primer" from <i>Newswings</i> (Philippines)</p> <p>- "What is abuse?" from <i>IWTC</i> (UN) Newsletter (Includes Japanese translation of difficult vocabulary)</p>
8	<p>"Beyond Beijing"</p>	<p>- <i>Yokohama Women's Association for Communication and Networking</i> video and instructor - generated worksheet</p>

9~ 13	Student Presentations and Quizzes	<p>Student Presentations and Quizzes- Students conduct 5 - minute Presentations</p> <p>Quiz - - each presenter administers a quiz to the class</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - students listening take notes in English and may use these notes for the quiz - presenters complete a self- evaluation form (the same form used by the instructor)
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