



# Fostering a Culture of Inclusion in an EFL Classroom

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## Fostering a Culture of Inclusion in an EFL Classroom

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### Abstract

The following paper discusses a detailed proposal for an exploratory research project focusing on student awareness of historically marginalized communities. The paper describes a semester-long EFL writing activity intended to foster inclusion and equity as valued matters of importance as well as promote writing for meaningful and authentic purposes.

**Key words:** Inclusion, equity, STEM, women, gender gap, LGBT, Half, *Hafu*, marginalized communities, minorities, authentic material, writing, portfolio

### 1. Introduction

This short paper presents a blueprint, or detailed plan, for an exploratory research project focusing on students' awareness of three historically marginalized groups in Japan: women, the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community, and the Japanese biracial (half or "hafu") population. The students involved in this study will all be second year students majoring in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) related disciplines taking a required EFL academic writing course. I have attempted this research project once before, but due to issues with trial and error, I have decided to redo the project minus the errors. While this paper will serve to provide my peers with ideas for their own classes, it will also serve as a detailed plan to help better guide my own approach during the next attempt.

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This paper will be delivered in four parts:

2. Background and literature review
3. Description of the writing project
4. Data collection and processing
5. Conclusion

## **2. Background and literature review**

At Kwansai Gakuin University, some efforts have been made in recent years to raise student and faculty awareness of historically marginalized peoples, namely those within the LGBT community. This has been mainly accomplished outside of the classroom, in the form of awareness campaigns, student-led events and festivities, and the on-campus distribution of relevant literature. In a self-initiated effort to contribute to this momentum, I have designed a semester-long writing portfolio activity for my second year academic writing students, which attempts to promote awareness of historically marginalized communities. In order to improve upon the assignment itself for future years, this exploratory research project, through the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, will gauge my students' awareness of the struggles facing three historically marginalized communities before, during, and after the completion of a relevant portfolio entry. It is my hope that this activity once complete will have effectively assisted in promoting inclusion and equity as valued matters of importance among the students involved in the project.

In addition to my desire to contribute to Kwansai Gakuin University's recent attempts to engage students in a discussion on heretofore marginalized communities, I am conducting this project because I have long sensed that there is a need for this type of awareness-education in the Japanese university classroom. One need only look to the gender gap women face in Japanese higher education, particularly in STEM related disciplines, to appreciate the need for education of the kind described here.

Women are significantly underrepresented in the world of Japanese higher education. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2016* ranked Japan 103 out of 144 countries in female tertiary educational attainment (Leopold, Ratcheva, and Zahidi, 2016). According to Inuzuka (2014), in 2013 women made up only 14.4% of all researchers in Japan, a very low number compared to other OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations like Russia, the UK, and the USA, all of which boast significantly higher numbers. Referencing the *White Paper on Gender Equality 2013*, compiled by the Gender Equality Bureau of Japan, Inuzuka also tells us that women account for only 10 to 20% of faculty members at universities, depending on the field in question. These num-

bers are smallest among women with full professorship positions in fields like engineering, science, and agriculture, where they occupy 3.1%, 4%, and 4.7% of existing positions, respectively (Inuzuka, 2014). Further, Geuna and Shibayama (2015), calling on various Japanese statistics compiled in 2013, report that while women made up 50% of all bachelor students, they made up only 30% of PhD graduates. They also share an even more disparaging percentage with respect to STEM disciplines, reporting that women comprised only 31% of bachelor graduates, and 25% of PhD graduates for the same year.

Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU), School of Science and Technology, is also no stranger to this reality. In 2016, women made up only 25.4% of the undergraduate student body and 19.5% of the postgraduate student body of the school. The numbers become even lower among 2017 first year undergraduate enrollees, depending on the major (numbers compiled in May, 2017). For example, the Department of Physics enrolled 73 first year students with women comprising only 18% of the total, and the Department of Nanotechnology yielded even lower numbers still, with 73 first year students and only 10% female enrollment. As an instructor at KGU's School of Science and Technology, I have often wondered what might be the reason behind this imbalance.

In a longitudinal study across eight nations, some gender-segregated, some not, Barone (2011) attempts to understand the reasons behind gender imbalance in higher education, and in particular why men are over represented in technically-oriented fields while women find more representation in care-related fields. His in-depth quantitative study seems to confirm, among other things, that “culturalist approaches [or hypotheses] focusing on sex-stereotyped expectations about curricular choice, possibly sustained by direct forms of social control, offer the most compelling explanation for gender segregation in higher education” (p.161). By sex-stereotyped expectations, Barone is referring to a particular kind of thinking prevalent in many societies: namely, that all things tech-related are “naturally” for the boys, while all things care-related are “naturally” for the girls (p.162). Perhaps, more clearly put, women are built for caring (the female archetype) while men are built for technical things or intellectual pursuits (the male archetype). Barone refers to this as the “care-technical divide” (p.158). In a nutshell, he found that this type of mentality, culturally embedded from a very young age, must be at least partly responsible for the significantly lower numbers of female representation in technically-oriented fields of study in higher education.

If we are to believe, then, that the results of Barone's (2011) longitudinal study carries some weight, it stands to reason that a change in thinking can effect a change in outcome. In other words, if societies make efforts to do away with the type of persistent mindset that pigeonholes women into traditionally subordinate

care-taker positions, perhaps the type of restrictive reality Barone (2011) accounts for in his study can slowly begin to dissipate. While it would be comically overambitious to think that one EFL instructor's writing project would make much of a dent in the mentality of a nation, a university, or even a large class of students, it should not preclude a movement in that direction. By providing students with a window into the deep and complicated struggles that women have faced, I believe we can begin the slow process toward actualizing equity and inclusion for all members of society. While the march is long and perhaps unending, it does not hurt for instructors to contribute to the effort.

This is the spirit behind which I have designed this writing assignment. In addition to providing students with an opportunity to exercise their academic writing skills utilizing authentic material, this project's objective is intended to effect a positive change in student mentality, however small. While my reasons for conducting this project stemmed from an understanding of the gender gap that women face in Japanese higher education, the project includes two other categories of historically marginalized peoples, as well: the LGBT community and the biracial Japanese population, or "hafu" community.

### **3. Description of the writing project**

In the academic writing course I teach to second year students, a significant portion of the students' overall grade (25 to 30%) is dependent on her/his writing portfolio packet or journal. All students must complete one to best of their ability in order to do well in the course. Up until recently, the writing portfolio I distributed to students was comprised of a series of prompts dealing with one's favorite food, holiday, music, etc. Students were intended to respond to these prompts utilizing one-half to one full page within the portfolio. One of the troubles I have come across when it comes to reading over student responses to these portfolio writing prompts is that they are tediously generic. While some instructors might think the fault lays with the students' lack of motivation or creativity, I have come to believe it has more to do with the boring writing prompt. Generic writing prompts lead to generic responses. The question "What did you do over the summer holiday?" will inspire just as much motivation in the writer to respond to it as it will in the reader to read it. This is probably because the student will have answered this same question in any number of her/his writing classes in the past. Partly in order to avoid this same result in my future writing courses, and partly to address the societal issues discussed earlier in this paper, I have designed an engaging writing portfolio project for my students. This portfolio project still asks students to write about their personal ideas, feelings, and opinions, but on deeper, less facile topics, than the

usual portfolio focus.

Over the course of one 14-week semester, during which classes meet once per week, students will be asked to write six entries in their portfolio. Students will be given time during class to respond to the writing prompts but are expected to complete what they cannot finish in class for homework. Four of the writing topics and prompts will be decided upon and designed by the instructor while two of the topics will be student-choice. Each writing prompt will be assigned a lecture from either TEDx Kyoto or TED Talks, all of which are easily accessible online. Each portfolio will be conducted over the course of 2 weeks. The 2 student-choice entries will be interspersed evenly between the four designed by the instructor such that the first two entries will be teacher-designed, the third student-choice, the fourth and fifth teacher-designed and the final student-choice. Each of the teacher-designed sessions will adhere to the following stages:

1. The teacher will provide students with a six-point Likert-scale survey to gauge their awareness of the struggles facing the historically marginalized community in question, prior to beginning the portfolio assignment. The survey will be written in English and Japanese (See Appendix 1).
2. The teacher will provide a mini-lecture (roughly 5 to 10 minutes in length) on some of the struggles facing the relevant community. The lecture is designed to complement the video lecture mentioned in stage 3.
3. The teacher will play a TEDx Kyoto or TED Talk lecture relevant to the topic (see Appendix 2 for a list of lectures and links).
4. The teacher will present students with a writing prompt designed to encourage students to think critically about the relevant community/population (see Appendix 3).
5. The teacher will provide students with another six-point Likert-scale survey to gauge their awareness of the struggles facing the historically marginalized community, after completing the portfolio entry. The survey will be written in English and Japanese (see Appendix 4).
6. On the final day of the project, after all 6 portfolios are complete, the students will complete a final survey which asks them to assess their overall experience. The questions will be written in English and Japanese (see Appendix 5).

Stages 1-4 will be conducted during week one of each session. Students will receive 20 minutes in class on day-one to work on stage 4. Students will be asked to complete the writing assignment for homework if they cannot complete it in the time allotted. On week two of each session, students will submit their written entry

and will then complete Stage 5. While each student's Likert-scale survey will be anonymous (see **Data collection and processing**), their portfolio entry will not as it plays a part of each student's grade. Having said that, grading and the analysis of the written responses for research purposes will take place separately, one process having no impact on the other (see **Data collection and processing**). To be clear, grading will take place first, then research analysis.

During the student-choice writing sessions, students will be given 20 minutes of class time in week one and again in week two to select a TEDx Kyoto lecture or TED Talk of their own liking and asked to respond to a writing prompt with a one-page portfolio entry. As this part of the portfolio is student-choice, no Likert survey will be presented to the students (see Appendix 6 for an example writing prompt).

#### **4. Data collection and processing**

Before beginning this semester-long portfolio session, students will sign a consent form which describes in full the details of the project and how I will use the data gathered. They will know that the only identifying information they need to write on the surveys is their gender, class number, and the laminated number they received at the beginning of the project (see details below). They will also know that while their Likert-scale questionnaires will remain anonymous to everyone, including the instructor, their written material will not. It should be noted here that once the papers are graded, and before any of the written material is analyzed for the purposes of this research project, student names will be removed from the documents in question. The instructor will make it abundantly clear, as will the consent form, that if students' written material is utilized in any presentation or publication, the student's name and or any other identifying information will not be made available to any outside parties. Students wishing not to participate in the study will be permitted to refrain from completing any questionnaires but will still have to complete the portfolio as part of their grade. Naturally, the written responses belonging to those in this category will also not be used in any presentation or publication.

Students will have to complete and submit 9 short surveys on separate days over the course of 14 weeks, so I have created a system which will ensure that students' surveys are collected in such a way as to maintain anonymity but also participant-to-survey integrity. After students have completed their consent form, they will be asked to pick a laminated card randomly placed face-down upon a desk in the classroom. On each card will be written a number. There will be as many cards on the table as there are students willing to participate in the study. Students will keep this numbered card in their possession throughout the semester. They will be asked to write this number at the top of each survey and written response that

they submit. By keeping the card in their possession throughout the semester, it is my expectation that students will not forget their number. Upon completion of the project, I will be able to collate all the surveys and the written-responses by this identifying marker and at the same time respect student anonymity. On the final day, I will instruct students to return their laminated number to a box placed in the back of the classroom. To reassure anonymity, I will leave the classroom while students complete this process.

Finally, once all the surveys are complete and collected, I will begin to collate and process the data. I will conduct a descriptive statistical analysis on the quantitative data using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 24. I will also analyze the students written responses to search for any insights the students may have come up with during the project. I am hoping to find that the students will have thought deeply about and gained greater awareness of the struggles these historically marginalized communities have faced.

## 5. Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, I once tried completing this project in the recent past. I came across a number of pitfalls because it was my first attempt at conducting quantitative research. Designing a solid consent form, a more meaningful Likert-scale survey, and understanding how to collect data so as to keep it all anonymous and properly collated has been a trial and error process. Unfortunately, I was not able to use much of the data I gathered the first time around due to unintentional missteps. However, I was able to learn a great deal from my mistakes. Presently, I am ready to move forward with this project in a better, more informed manner. It is my hope that this project will serve its purpose to raise both student awareness of minority/marginalized groups as well as provide an opportunity for students to write on meaningful topics that stir their interest, at least more so than their favorite food or most embarrassing moment.

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#### **Appendix 1: Example survey items administered prior to viewing a TEDx Kyoto lecture**

- I am very aware of the problems LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people experience. [LGBT (レズビアン、ゲイ、バイセクシュアル、トランスジェンダー) が抱える問題について、よく知っています。]
- I feel sympathy for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender) people who experience discrimination. [LGBT (レズビアン、ゲイ、バイセクシュアル、トランスジェンダー) が受ける差別に対して、同情することがある。]

#### **Appendix 2: List of TEDx Kyoto and TED Talks lectures**

- Carter, J. (2015, May). *Why I believe the mistreatment of women is the number one human rights abuse* [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/jimmy\\_carter\\_why\\_i\\_believe\\_the\\_mistreatment\\_of\\_women\\_is\\_the\\_number\\_one\\_human\\_rights\\_abuse](https://www.ted.com/talks/jimmy_carter_why_i_believe_the_mistreatment_of_women_is_the_number_one_human_rights_abuse)
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#### **Appendix 3: Example writing prompt**

Watch President Carter's TED Talk. What does he say are the 3 basic causes of abuse towards women and girls in the world? How does Carter say we can change this problem? Does Carter's speech apply to Japan? How can you, in Japan, contribute to the change Carter advocates?

#### **Appendix 4: Example survey items administered after completing a portfolio entry**

- After I watched Patrick Linehan's speech and completed the writing portfolio entry, I became better aware of the problems LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people experience. [Patrick Linehan の TEDx Kyoto スピーチを見てポートフォリオの論文を書いてから、LGBT (レズビアン、ゲイ、バイセクシュアル、トランスジェンダー) が抱える問題について、もっとよく分かるようになった。]
- After I watched Patrick Linehan's speech and completed the writing portfolio entry, I came to feel more sympathy for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people who experience discrimination. [Patrick Linehan の TEDx Kyoto スピーチを見てポートフォリオの論文を書いてから、LGBT (レズビアン、ゲイ、バイセクシュアル、トランスジェンダー) が受ける差別に対して、もっと同情するようになった。]

**Appendix 5: Example survey items meant to gauge students' overall assessment of the project**

- By doing these assignments, I was able to learn more about minorities in Japan and the struggles they face. [TED Talk を使った Portfolio に取り組むことで、マイノリティ（少数派）の存在や彼らが直面している困難しさについて、学ぶことができたと思う。]
- I like using TED Talks as a basis for my writing portfolio. [Writing Portfolio に取り組むのに TED Talk を使うのが好きだ。]
- I would like to do assignments like this in other classes. [他の授業でも同じように、学習用の教科書ではなく、TED Talk などの材料を使って英語を学習したい。]
- These assignments helped me to develop my ability to write in English. [TED Talk を使った Portfolio は英語のライティング・スキルの向上につながったと思う。]

**Appendix 6: Example student-choice writing prompt**

Choose a TEDx Kyoto or TED Talk that interests you. Summarize the speech. In your summary, write about the speaker's background, and about the content of the speech. Why did you choose this particular speech? What did you learn from it? Do you agree or disagree with her/his ideas? Why?

Speaker's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Title of the speech: \_\_\_\_\_