

Cultural Sensitivity in English Language Teaching Materials

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Abstract

This expository paper will begin by uncovering and examining some lesser known, Western journal articles, ones that deal specifically with the issue of cultural sensitivity in language classrooms. This opening discussion will attempt to reveal that cultural sensitivity in teaching materials is by no means an issue limited solely to the Western world. After this, the discussion will focus on Edward Said's widely-known Culture and Imperialism. Said's monograph will be used as a springboard to examine the larger issue of colonialism, and imperialism, in classrooms. Lastly, the extended conclusion will reiterate, as well as expand upon, the practical implications of the initial analysis for the benefit of Japan-based foreign language educators. Accordingly, the final paragraphs of this paper will examine one of the most widely used intercultural simulations, Bafa Bafa.

Introduction

No less than thirty-seven years ago, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English noted that ethnic minorities suffer substantial discrimination in jobs, housing, civil rights, and education (Olmann, 1971, p. 713). This task force found that the typical English curriculum was culturally impoverished in terms of being a truthful representation of the true diversity of American society (Olmann, 1971, p. 713). Although many language educators in Japan would today disagree with this task force's recurrent use of the term *non-white*, which seems to imply that Anglo-Saxon literature is the benchmark against which other literature is measured, it continues to be a most lamentable fact that this issue is still a concern eight years into the twenty-first century.

Valerie Lewis and Rose Reissman

Evidence that English language teaching (ELT) resources are still not as multicultural as they should be, or could be, comes from two highly regarded educational periodicals: Instructor and Learning. While both journals handle multicultural literature with a definite sense of exploring an out of the ordinary, exotic minority, rather than a sense that these ethnic minorities are remarkably similar to any other ethnic group, they do tackle the issue in different

ways. In Instructor, Valerie Lewis suggests that educators should select books that celebrate cultural similarities, not differences (Lewis, 1994, p.39). Rose Reissman's article in Learning goes one step further in acknowledging that students who find the **similarities** inherent to all cultures will have recognized their own power to reduce racism (Reissman, 1994, p. 57). Of the two articles, Reissman's is perhaps the more worthy of praise, since it is the more practical one. For instance, Reissman recommends an activity in which the teacher reads out a section from a book that is taken from a particular culture, omits the culturally-specific words, then has students guess what culture the story is set in (Reissman, 1994, p. 58). This activity would probably appeal to ELT educators who believe in the concept of the global village, since many students might not be able to correctly guess what culture the story deals with. Instead, such students might come to appreciate that they have much in common with people from other cultures.

Rudolfo Anaya

Now, in terms of the importance of cultural sensitivity in learning resources, Rudolfo Anaya has written that to reverse America's deplorable dropout statistics, and to help create a positive self-image in learners, we need to present literature that accurately reflects cultural diversity (Anaya, 1992, p 19). Using more culturally sensitive material in English classes could help reduce dropout rates since "*...what is pertinent to our personal background is pertinent to our process of learning*" (Anaya, 1992, p 19). In other words, if learners feel that what they are studying has more relevance to their own backgrounds and lives, they will not be as swift to become at-risk. Clearly, Anaya was writing for an American audience, but many ELT practitioners would argue that his comments are at least partially valid at formerly national universities in Japan.

Another point which Anaya makes which may be more valid in Japan than in many heterogenous, culturally diverse, Western democracies, concerns his assertion that educators are not free to teach because all nations perpetuate the "myth" of national unity and coherence (Anaya, 1992, p 20). However, it must be noted that the Japan-based writer of this article has never felt constrained, or limited in any way, in his daily pedagogical duties. Even though this particular writer teaches in a distinctly homogenous, nationally unified nation, he has always felt free to instruct his lessons in whatever manner he deemed appropriate. Even in his Western teaching experience, the writer of this article felt unconstrained in utilizing ethnically diverse

ELT materials. As a brief example, the poetry textbook that was available for use with the grade eight language learners (Poetry In Focus, by Globe/Modern Curriculum Press) featured the work of Michael Ondaatje, Joy Kogawa, Andrew Suknaski, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and others. If any given textbook has been found to be overly ethnocentric, this writer has always enjoyed the professional freedom to shelve it, and use more culturally diverse sources- both here in Japan and in the West.

Rudolfo Anaya has also asserted that “ethnic” Americans are told that someone else has the proper literature and language to describe their reality (Anaya, 1992, p 20). Anaya then goes on to argue that every ethnic community in the USA has much to teach the whole country. Although he is to be lauded for including genders and ethnicities other than his own, one could argue that the days of “native” residential schools for First Nations children are, thankfully, long since dead. In 2008, few conscientious educators would argue that any single culture's literature or language should dominate another's. Granted that there is far too much racism, as well as other forms of discrimination, in many parts of the world, but this particular writer would argue that celebrating cultural diversity benefits everyone involved- regardless of whether or not the setting is in a homogenous, or heterogenous, nation!

In addition, Rudolfo Anaya is writing for an audience that is a cultural “melting pot,” whereas many Japanese foreign language classrooms are far less culturally diverse. An illustration of this occurs on page twenty of his article, where Anaya deplores that most American pre-service training never teaches multicultural literature. He argues that first-year teachers are, therefore, never “free to teach” (Anaya, 1992, p 19) While equating cultural awareness and sensitivity with the concept of freedom may well be perceived as a contentious notion, it could be opined that those who refuse to see beyond the rim of the melting pot are limited, perhaps, by their own myopia. As for pre-service teacher training, many teacher training curricula now provide student teachers with opportunities to encounter multicultural literature. Thus, Anaya would probably argue that teachers today are able to operate more freely in their English language classrooms!

Edmund J. Farrell and Linda Reed

In his English Education journal article, Edmund J. Farrell has written that multi cultural literature helps achieve **self-identity** in two ways (Farrell, 1977, p. 76). According to Farrell, self- identity comes from one's past, through literary participation in the lives of one's

ancestors; and secondly, through similar participation in the lives of those quite different from oneself. In a similar vein, Linda Reed, writing in the March, 1976, issue of Language Arts, makes a related point when she claims that other cultures have ways of looking at life and expressing ideas that can **expand** readers' own understandings (Reed, 1976, p. 258).

While these comments appear innocent enough, it should not be automatically assumed that literature is the dominant way to help learners achieve selfhood. That is to say, pride in the members of one's ethnic group should not be confused with, or equated with, pride in oneself as a unique individual. After all, if a person's cultural ancestors, or peers, have made important, life-improving discoveries, it does not automatically follow that she/he will have better knowledge about who they are. One may well take pride in one's cultural roots, but self-knowledge generally stems from personal, not vicarious, action. Moreover, positive interaction with ethnicity in a direct, first-hand fashion builds respect for culture, as well as self-esteem, for both sides engaged in it.

Thus, it is somewhat surprising that neither Anaya, Farrell, nor Reed mention **positive interaction** with culture as a means of enhancing cultural sensitivity and intercultural awareness. For instance, if a Japanese university class is studying the Joseph Conrad novella Heart of Darkness, why not screen, and then analyze, the Francis Ford Coppola film based on this literary work, Apocalypse Now? Or, students could create a board game where one team attempts the fictitious colonization of an imaginary nation, while the other team resists this attempted imperialism. Or, after finishing Heart of Darkness, students could read Chinua Achebe's account of Nigerian resistance to colonization, Things Fall Apart. It is important for language learners to understand that cultural products (including learning materials) are not lifeless museum pieces. Instead, learners should have opportunities to realize that culture is vibrant, dynamic, and constantly changing- and, that it can be an enjoyable, active experience! Anne R. Gere and Kubota Ryuko

While the purpose of this paper has been to sing the mellifluous praises of multicultural literature in classrooms, and thus promote cultural sensitivity, the caveat should be made that there are certain pitfalls to be avoided. Anne R. Gere, writing in Language Arts, discusses stereotypes, and asserts that American schools have often been environments for large-scale "multi-ethnic" activities. Multicultural food clothing, and dance, according to Gere, is nothing more than exchanging one stereotype for another (Gere, 1976, p. 246). In other words,

to see only a simplified fraction of something as complex as an entire culture is not very different from any other over-generalized blanket statement. This, by the way, directly relates to Kubota Ryuko's concept of the "four Fs": food, fashion, folkdances, and festivals.

In addition, the isolation of one specific culture for in-depth examination and nothing more, is probably not as realistic, or as accurate, as contrasting and comparing it to other ones, stressing mutual similarities. This, of course, relates to the Reissman article above. Just as ethnic groups are not static, nor do they exist in isolation from each other.

Gere also warns against hopping aboard the multicultural bandwagon without knowing enough about the culture in question (Gere, 1976, p. 247). The obvious question here, one supposes, is how does one define **enough**? To this writer's mind, enough depends on the particular educator's cultural sensitivity, as well as on the group of students involved. But, whenever an educator does not feel comfortable with a work of ethnic literature, or any ELT materials at all, there would be no harm in consulting with a member of the ethnic group in question for *insider* advice and suggestions. At this point in the discussion, a metaphor in the form of a question might prove useful- the proverbial query a soon-to-be father asks his pregnant wife, namely: "How does it feel to be pregnant?"

The answer, of course, is that one really cannot begin to comprehend how it feels to be "with child" unless one has had the opportunity to live for nine months with another human being attached to one's abdomen! Similarly, many marginalized ethnic groups argue that one cannot begin to understand their plight until one has figuratively worn their shoes. All the more reason for consulting living members of the cultural group you're planning on introducing. One of the wonderful benefits of the internet age, and URLs like Facebook, is that ELT educators do not usually have much difficulty consulting members of a particular ethnicity!

Compared to both the Lewis and the Reissman journal articles, the Anne R. Gere article was the most prescriptive. Examples of hands-on, practical advice she provided her reader with include class challenges such as designing a dance that uses the traditions of several different cultures, and constructing an igloo-making machine. Some Japanese ELT stakeholders have opined that too much of ELT in Japan is conformist-oriented, and that not enough of it is creativity-oriented. So, many foreign language teachers might agree with Gere when she comments that when students are encouraged to use their talents of imagination in a *milieu* where no idea is considered wrong, and where creativity is encouraged, they begin to transcend

the thought processes that foster cultural gaps and attain those that foster cultural bridges.

A Few Implications for ELT Educators in Japan

What are the implications of all this for Japan-based English language educators? Well, one would have to be: "Don't feel limited by the textbook!" Discovering your own multicultural resources can be most rewarding. Also, always try to stress the similarities between cultures, since students who find cultural similarities inherent in all cultures will have realized their own power to reduce racism. Culturally-sensitive pedagogical practitioners keep students' backgrounds in mind when selecting materials, to try and make these more pertinent to students. Another implication here is to present the target culture in a way that is not dilute or static, since this is equivalent to presenting a stereotype (ie. avoid examining only food, clothing, proverbs, and festivals!). A final implication would be the reminder not to hesitate to confer with members of the target culture, especially when one's comfort level with the material is not that high.

Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

Now, until this point, this paper has dealt with researchers and theorists who may not be household names to many Japan-based scholars. Thus, the time is nigh to offer a discussion of a more widely known researcher in the field, namely Edward Said. In her Harvard Educational Review critique of Said's Culture and Imperialism, Pepi Leistyna has perceptively argued that Said's monograph benefited from a timely release in the United States, thanks to the way in which nationalism, and shared Western values, had allegedly become an increasingly prominent part of American public education (Leistyna, 1995). Leistyna further observed that mainstream American learners are taught to celebrate the uniqueness of their tradition- at the expense of ethnic minority "Others" (Leistyna, 1995). This book review concludes by recommending Said's publication to all classroom educators interested in changing their ethnocentric practices, and exploring the possibilities of a truly transformational pedagogy (Leistyna, 1995). In this way, Leistyna's interpretation of Edward Said conforms to the lesser known work, already unearthed above, by Lewis, Reissman, Gere, Anaya, Farrell, and Reed.

One of the most pressing questions to arise from the preceding paragraph, then, becomes what are the implications of Culture and Imperialism for ELT educators here in the largest northeast Asian archipelago? Unfortunately, this particular writer would argue that the implications of Culture and Imperialism for Japan-based ELT educators are sadly similar to the ones outlined by Leistyna. That is to say, cultural chauvinism and "Orientalism" are also issues that conscientious teachers in the

land of the rising sun also need to be aware of. Although one could certainly make the case that such bigotry and racism is less prevalent, and less readily observable, here in Japan.

The ideal American classroom is portrayed by Leistyna as one devoid of ethnocentric, imperialistic practices. Given that this definition of "ideal" could also apply to any classroom anywhere in the world, it is worth briefly touching upon Awad Ibrahim's concept of the third space, since this concept allows a classroom practitioner to eliminate many forms of cultural chauvinism, or Orientalism, from her/his worldview. Very briefly, Ibrahim's third space transcends Said's notion of hybrid identity (ie. Japanese-Canadian, Palestinian-American, Greek-Australian), and hopefully offers a solution to the Saidean fear of "clashes of civilization." In other words, the major thrust of Said's argument is that metropolises and colonies, post-industrial nations and "the periphery," should not be clashing, but should peaceably coexist, if their mutual benefit is to be maximized. So, how exactly can the third space paradigm serve to eliminate, or at least reduce, such cultural clashes? This paradigm permits people to move beyond cultural membership, and affiliation, in solely their birth culture (Ibrahim, 1999).

Awad Ibrahim's Concept of The Third Space

The third space lies in between one's birth culture and one's adopted culture, effectively providing for mental, and physical, migrants to subscribe to neither, and both, at the same time (Ibrahim, 1999). This third space, then, is fully autonomous from both one's birth culture, as well as one's adopted, or secondary, culture (Ibrahim, 1999). At the risk of gross oversimplification, one is consequently more of a global citizen than a member of any one specific national group. Of course, the pedagogical benefit of this paradigm has to do with the fact that it leads directly to enhanced cross-cultural understanding. Without wanting to appear overly naive, or utopian, if more people would position themselves in this third space, perhaps neocolonialism, and neoimperialism, might have less of a foothold in many societies. Such an improvement could, pragmatically, result in increased cultural sensitivity in ELT learning materials- not only here in Japan, but elsewhere, as well!

Noam Chomsky Answers Three Questions about Transformative Pedagogy

While Edward Said has refrained from directly connecting his analyses of cultural imperialism to a classroom context, Noam Chomsky has been less reticent about discussing education. Pepi Leistyna and Stephen Sherblom have interviewed Chomsky for the Harvard Educational Review. During this interview, three questions were specifically directed to educators

(Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995, p. 137). Although targeted to the United States, however, these three questions are certainly not devoid of interest for language educators here in Japan. Now, the first of these simply queried how educational institutions contribute to the colonizing of people's minds. Although Chomsky's response does not relate directly to cultural chauvinism, it does recognize that schools are key players in the manufacturing of consent for the social *status quo*. Clearly, this *status quo* includes the cultural chauvinism that was of such interest to Edward Said. More specifically, Chomsky asserts that this colonizing of people's minds:

"... starts in Kindergarten: the school system tries to repress independence, it tries to teach obedience. Kids, and other people, are not induced to challenge and question, but the contrary. If you start questioning, you're a behavioural problem or something like that. You've got to be disciplined. You're supposed to repeat, obey, follow orders, and so on. When you get over to the more totalitarian end, like the Newt Gingriches, they actually want to do things like coerce kids into praying..." (Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995, p. 138).

With this reply, Chomsky is adhering to an orthodox critical theory perspective on education. This stance posits that schools willingly, or unwillingly, indoctrinate children into docile acceptance of the socially unjust status quo. This mental colonialism does have a parallel to Culture and Imperialism, by way of Philip G. Altbach. In chapter 24 of Comparative Education (1982), "*Servitude of The Mind? Education, Dependency, And NeoColonialism*," Altbach has defined neocolonialism as a conscious set of policies held by industrialized nations to exert their influence and power over developing nations (Altbach, 1982). Even a superficial perusal of just a few chapters of Culture and Imperialism will probably reveal that this is precisely what Said wanted to expose in Western literature, as well as in the Verdi opera Aida. One, therefore, imagines that both Chomsky and Said would agree with Altbach's distinction between such neocolonialism, and dependency. Altbach determined that the former differs from the latter in that it is a deliberate means of maintaining domination, and that it is a choice taken by both developed and developing nations, or at least the policy-makers of both groups (Altbach, 1982). The examples of neocolonialism cited by Altbach include foreign aid, trade agreements, even educational exchanges (Altbach, 1982)! Given that cultural chauvinism is sadly present in many ELT materials, these examples do not come as much of a surprise. The question raised by all this is whether or not there is a hermeneutic difference between Altbach's use of the term neocolonialism, and Said's use of the term imperialism. To this writer's mind, there is no great difference between the two, save for the fact that the former implies a

second wave, or second generation, of colonialism, whereas the latter has never seen its initial phase formally terminated.

Returning back to the Harvard Educational Review interview with Noam Chomsky, the two co-editors posed a question to him concerning what teachers could do to work toward more democratic social change (Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995). Unfortunately, Chomsky's reply was not overly encouraging. He cynically commented that any classroom educator who tried to act like an "honest, independent person" would probably be thrown out, since the school board would not like this- especially if it is comprised of wealthy parents (Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995). At this point, one might begin to speculate about Edward Said's reaction to this. While Said would more than likely appreciate, and support, democratic social change in classrooms, one wonders if his response to this question would be as cynical as Chomsky's. In arguing that we need to capitalize on what different cultures share in common, rather than on what separates them, Said's analysis could be perceived as being comparatively more positive, more uplifting. Notice also that this question, and certainly Chomsky's take on it, contains an element of class consciousness. Culture and Imperialism largely avoids this divisive issue of class conflict.

The third and final interview question for Chomsky that specifically related to education concerned the realistic possibilities of critical pedagogy. Once again, Chomsky offered a cynical response. He replied that critical pedagogy would not be tolerated in the United States, since it was widely thought to be too subversive (Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995). He then paraphrased his belief that the educational system actively produces learners who are obedient and submissive, and that this starts from Kindergarten (Leistyna & Sherblom, 1995). Professor Chomsky warned that if teachers "go too far" in trying to practice critical pedagogy, there would be pressures for them to stop. One suspects that Said would wholly endorse this emphasis on heightened social justice in Japanese, and American, foreign language classrooms, although his personal interests gravitate more toward ethnocentrism, "Orientalism," and cultural chauvinism, and less toward neoMarxist class conflict analyses!

Conclusion, Including a Description of Bafa Bafa

In conclusion, this paper started out by shedding light on some lesser known, Western articles written about cultural sensitivity in language classrooms. These initial articles were authored by Valerie Lewis, Rose Reissman, Anne R. Gere, Rudolfo Anaya, Edmund J. Farrell, and Linda Reed. Subsequent to this, Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism was used as a springboard to

examine the larger issue of colonialism, and imperialism, in classrooms. Even though colonialism has been formally dismantled, Philip G. Altbach has written that neocolonialism most definitely has not. This paper also revealed how there is most likely no great hermeneutic difference between such neocolonialism and Said's conception of imperialism.

While this paper was generally supportive of Said's compelling argument that Western art, and by extension Western ELT resources, have been guilty of "Orientalism," that is, portraying non-Caucasian *Others* as peculiar, or even inferior, it has not done so blindly. In fact, three personal, yet rather minor, criticisms should now be articulated. These minor criticisms of Culture and Imperialism relate to its surprising use of *native* as a racial category; to its reliance on only post-1945 examples of indigenous resistance; and, to its insistence that the darkness in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness most ostensibly refers to "*native resistance*." With respect to this latter point, other scholars have convincingly argued that the darkness in Conrad's novella could just as well be referring to the moral turpitude of the Western imperial powers.

Additionally, it has also been seen how Edward Said wrote about the need for human beings to actively search out the many things that unite them, as opposed to that which divides them. The implications here for language educators in Japan are great. And, as Noam Chomsky has scathingly pointed out, the road to heightened social justice is a long one, one riddled with pitfalls. Perhaps Japan-based language educators might wish to begin the arduous journey along this road by striving to be more sensitive to, and aware of, the issue of cultural chauvinism in learning resources.

At this point, it might prove useful to reiterate the practical implications of the preceding pages for Japan-based English language educators. To be sure, one key implication seen above was: "Don't feel limited by the textbook!" After all, discovering one's own multicultural resources can be most rewarding. In addition, and as will be seen momentarily in the Bafa Bafa simulation below, conscientious language teachers usually try to emphasize intercultural similarities, since students who find the cultural similarities inherent in all cultures will have realized their own power to reduce racism. Similarly, culturally-sensitive pedagogical practitioners keep students' backgrounds in mind when selecting materials, to try and make these more pertinent to students. Another caveat that has already been articulated was for foreign language teachers to present the target culture in a way that is not dilute or static, since this could run the danger of presenting a stereotype (ie. avoid examining only food, clothing,

proverbs, and festivals!). A final suggestion for ELT educators was the friendly reminder not to hesitate to confer with members of the target culture, especially when one's familiarity level with the target culture might not be all that high.

Finally, many of the practical implications, and theories, of the preceding paragraphs are epitomized in the Bafa Bafa group simulation. Donald Glenn Carroll has outlined five reasons why Japan-based ELT practitioners interested in cultural sensitivity might wish to try out Bafa Bafa (Carroll, 1997). Firstly, Bafa Bafa builds awareness of how cultural differences can profoundly impact people in an organization, or university. Secondly, it motivates participants to rethink their behavior and attitudes toward others. Thirdly, Bafa Bafa allows participants to examine their own bias, and to focus on how they perceive differences. Fourthly, it encourages participants to examine how stereotypes are developed, barriers created, and misunderstandings magnified. Finally, Bafa Bafa helps identify diversity issues within organizations, or ELT classrooms, that need to be addressed (Carroll, 1997).

Briefly, the Bafa Bafa simulation centers upon the interaction between two very different cultures, Alpha and Beta. The Alpha culture is relationship oriented, and patriarchal—women are considered to be the property of men. Alphans are also very tactile. If Alphans are not touching, they should stand close together. If an Alphan were to stand more than a few centimeters away while talking to another Alphan, it would be like shouting “I don’t like you!” This culture is patterned on closed, high context cultures, where interpersonal relationships and physical closeness are prized values. Alphans can speak English, and their greetings are highly formulaic. After an initial greeting, Alphans discuss in detail the health, achievements, and wisdom of their grandfathers, fathers, and any male children in their families.

As for the Beta culture, it is highly competitive. Betans speak no English or Japanese, so all their communication can only be in the Beta language, which consists of monosyllabic words and gestures. In Beta culture, it is a great insult for a person to speak any language other than Beta while in Beta territory. If people from other cultures cannot speak Beta, then they may only use sign language, or non-verbal communication. Beta culture is very much a “time is money”, “you are what you earn” trading culture. It even has a specialized trading language to replicate the effect of dealing with a foreign language. In fact, the name of this simulation, Bafa Bafa, means four in the Beta language. “Ba” means one, “Ba Fa” means two, “Ba Fa Ba” means three, and so on.

So, how exactly can Bafa Bafa be implemented in ELT classrooms? To begin with, three representatives from each of the two cultures are exchanged. These representatives are on a fact-finding mission to learn about the other culture. Except for female members of the Alpha culture, who may not talk to foreigners, all members of both cultures are to interact with these three “*strangers*.” The three representatives then return to their original cultures, and report their findings. In this writer’s personal experience, these findings are usually the same. The three representatives usually report that they felt lost, confused, invisible, or alienated, in the other culture.

Next, all students are encouraged to respond to these negative feelings. They discuss how they went about solving their cross-cultural communication problems during the simulation. Typically, some students withdraw, others get angry, some seek revenge on the other culture, while some totally discount this “rival” culture’s values. Finally, the teacher emphasizes that if Bafa Bafa participants merely focus on solving these problems (i.e. withdrawal, anger, revenge, or cultural discounting) the cultural differences appear greater. But, when Bafa Bafa participants are able to discuss the common intercultural problems that they all shared (i.e. how to feel welcome, competent, or valued when interacting with another culture) they then draw closer together. In this writer’s opinion, this latter point lies at the very heart of Bafa Bafa’s intrinsic value.

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