Cook-It-Yourself Dining in the English Language Classroom

Colleen Dalton

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When I eat out, I just want to be filled up; I don't want to cook. To me, eating out means paying someone else do the legwork of shopping, chopping, mixing, fixing, and serving so I can satisfy my hunger. The popularity of *okonomiyaki* restaurants has therefore been somewhat mysterious to me during my years in Japan. Recently, though, when restaurants and classrooms briefly occupied the same space in my brain, I not only started to appreciate *okonomiyaki* places more, but I also began to wonder if the image of cook-it-yourself dining might be a useful one in the English classroom.

Much of what I think is supposed to happen in a restaurant does not happen in an *okonomiyaki* restaurant, so I watch and follow and finish the meal but nevertheless feel that something is missing. Although when I get home I am usually full, I also often feel it was not the night out that I had hoped for. I suspect that for similar reasons Japanese students may sometimes go through English communication classes with comparable feelings of disappointment and perhaps even frustration.

In this paper, I use the analogy of an *okonomiyaki* restaurant as a method for reflecting on English communication classrooms in Japan and suggest that recognizing and addressing possible student expectation mismatch at the outset of a course may improve student performance and satisfaction. Additionally, such a recognition might lead teachers to reflect on the place of critical pedagogy in English language teaching.

1. Student Expectations

The Course of Study (2008) for foreign language in lower secondary school has as one of its overall objectives the development of "basic communication abilities" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], Section 9, I.) using the four language skills of listening,

speaking, reading, and writing. The university students I talk with, however, generally claim to have been led to approach English as a subject much like any other rather than as a tool for communication. When asked about classroom practices, for example, they have indicated that most teachers followed textbooks, focusing on grammar points that were likely to appear on entrance exams. According to a 2014 MEXT survey of 3rd-year high school students, only 35% reported using English for discussion and only about 23% for presentations (MEXT, 2015b). Many students may have been taught by a modified grammar-translation method which continues to be used in places "where understanding literary texts is the primary focus of foreign language study and there is little need for a speaking knowledge of the language" (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 7). While some students may have specific personal or professional goals that require communicative skills, most are likely following the school curriculum and the teacher's lead and hope to do well on an entrance exam some time in the future.

Masumi Tahira (2012), in her study of the 2008 Course of Study, concluded that although MEXT began to introduce communicative language teaching (CLT) as early as 1989, CLT is still "not well rooted in Japan" (p. 6). According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), CLT takes a variety of forms, but all "focus on achieving a communicative purpose as opposed to a control of structure" and all are learner centered (p. 87). However, for many students, memorization in a teacher-fronted classroom has continued to be the major student effort in language learning. Such students likely expect in the classroom, then, a diet of grammar rules and a star rating based on accuracy.

Despite the fact that "the implementation of CLT appears to be happening at a sluggish pace" (Tahira, 2012, p. 5), it has been embraced by assistant language teachers (ALTs) in secondary education and by language teachers in universities, perhaps in part because of job descriptions and in part because CLT is relatively "user-friendly" for native speaker teachers. While ALTs are usually paired with Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) in secondary school settings, non-Japanese language teachers at the university level are responsible for their own classrooms. As a result, students may experience their first full CLT classroom as first-year university students.

Entering university without much CLT experience, students may understandably be confused or dissatisfied in an English communication classroom setting where there may be little presented for memorization and few mechanical exercises or objective tests.

In the U.S. context, Lisa Delpit (1988) recorded the result of a similar expectation mismatch. A Black student who wanted to be taught formal written

language said this about a White teacher's process writing approach: "She wanted us to correct each other's papers and we were there to learn from her. She didn't teach anything, absolutely nothing" (cited in Bartolome, 1994/2009, p. 339). The teacher in question may or may not have explained the thinking behind her pedagogical choices, which may or may not have been appropriate for those particular students, but it is clear that the activity was not meaningful for the student, at least in part because it did not meet the student's expectation. Many Japanese students may also expect classroom teachers to serve up something ready for consumption, and when they are not so served, when there is an expectation mismatch, less learning happens.

Without background knowledge of CLT, students may hesitate in the classroom. Elaine Horwitz (1988) has suggested that because "student beliefs about language learning can be based on limited knowledge and/or experience, the teacher's most effective course may be to confront erroneous beliefs with new information" (p. 292). While the paradigm shift represented by CLT may not be surprising at all to the teacher hired for that purpose, it may still be a new experience for the students and should be recognized as such. Horwitz (1988) affirms the need to address student "preconceived notions" of language learning in order to promote openness to "particular teaching methods" (p. 293) and ensure students can receive the most from the class.

When I first entered an *okonomiyaki* restaurant, the hot plate built into the table was a clear clue to me that something different from my expectation would be required for a successful evening. Although I feel I am only now beginning to understand the "why" of cook-it-yourself dining, at least I immediately saw a difference. Students, however, only sometimes have classroom expectations laid out to them in such concrete ways; rarely are they led to consider the "whys." Desks may be set up in a circle or in groups, but this means only group work. Group work itself is not unfamiliar and does not always promote learner-centered language use. A syllabus may be like an explanation of a five-course meal, highlighting the dishes and maybe the ingredients, but it often does not offer an explanation of the process or recognize that the final assessment can only come from the consumer. Although most language teachers know that previous knowledge or world experience activated in a pre-reading exercise can help learners make better sense of what they read, they may neglect to include a similar pre-CLT exercise at the beginning of a communication course.

Students do not need to understand the classroom setting in highly academic terms. They do not need to know definitions of communicative competence, schema theory, or top-down processing. However, they do need to know what is expected from them, not only in terms of product but also in terms of

process and assessment. In my experience, students know what a *test* means. Most prepare for it, arrive to class on time, and take responsibility for their performance. Some other classroom activities are taken less seriously, I think, because students assume they are in an unassessed receptive stage of learning. CLT, however, affirms that language use itself is more than simple practice of studied forms. Learning happens through use, the process of shopping, chopping, mixing, and fixing. If English teachers, particularly non-Japanese English teachers, are combining language content with unfamiliar teaching approaches or methods, they must provide students with a new mental picture of a language classroom. While a CLT classroom may be culturally foreign, its main features of learning-through-use and learner centeredness are culturally familiar in the context of the Japanese experience of cook-it-yourself dining. Using the analogy of the classroom as an *okonomiyaki* restaurant may enable students to begin to understand that they themselves must assume significant responsibility for creating the dishes that will satisfy their hunger.

2. Critical Pedagogy

Raising student awareness about the CLT (or another unfamiliar teaching approach) classroom has learning benefits, but it can only happen if teachers themselves are first conscious of their own pedagogical choices as well as their deeper beliefs. Fostering a critical perspective on language teaching means examining the relationship between language and the images of society it projects. Critical pedagogy cannot be easily or clearly defined, but in a fundamental sense it uncovers and addresses "how schools have historically embraced theories and practices that serve to unite knowledge and power in ways that sustain asymmetrical relations of power" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 10). While education traditionally has sought to give knowledge to the next generation and, at times, promote individual social mobility, it has not fundamentally questioned the power structures in society. Rather, education in general and language education in particular have often served to stabilize societal structures, including those structures that divide and value people on the basis of class, race, and gender. Language has also been a part of colonization, both in situations of a conquering power and in situations within a single political unit, as in the case of Black English in the United States. English teachers in Japan today, again particularly non-Japanese teachers, must take a critical look at the role of English as an international language in a global world. What values does the language embrace and transmit and what values do teachers promote through the textbooks they choose and the classroom practices they use?

Although it is difficult to define critical pedagogy in detail apart from particular situations, it demands that educators become more aware of how certain groups hold and retain power in society and how what happens in the classroom can strengthen those structures or begin to transform them. To return to the dining theme, cookie-cutter burger shop owners have enriched themselves by serving the same cheap fare to all who enter while keeping their recipes secret. Cook-it-yourself dining, on the other hand, promotes and values diversity. It is open to new creation rather than dependent on reproduction and imitation. Education, whether recognized by educators or not, is always more than the simple transmission of information.

Critical pedagogy is a topic far too big for this short essay, but I would like to explore two points that I believe should be recognized in English language teaching in Japan: (1) language diversity and (2) multiculturalism in the language classroom.

Language diversity. While recent "enhancements" to English education in Japan have been explicitly tied to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, they have more generally been fueled by the demands of globalization. Introducing its "Five Recommendations," MEXT (2014b) writes, "Amid ongoing globalization, the development of students' proficiency in English, a common international language, is crucial for Japan's future." The very spread of English, though, has resulted in a greater variety of Englishes, complicating the job of a conscientious English teacher. Whose English should be taught? Whose should be accepted?

Many teachers and students may feel uncomfortable with gray in the language classroom, preferring answers to questions. Teachers often have significant experience with only a single variety of English, or a local variety plus academic English. Students may have had short exposures to different varieties, but their experiences with multiple choice and scrambled sentence tests have nevertheless given many a black and white view of English. Learners, for example, may still ask for the single correct pronunciation of a word or be eager to know if certain constructions are either "always" or "never" possible. In the classroom, teacher responses to student questions can either reinforce the fallacy that English is monolithic and that the teacher is *the* model of correct English, or they can begin to undermine it by recognizing the increasing diversity of English. They can either use language to fortify the wall between teachers and students or begin to weaken it.

Paulo Freire (1970), perhaps the best known and most influential name in critical pedagogy, emphasizes that students must be subjects not objects in their own education. The beginning of education, he writes, must solve "the teacher-student contradiction," creating a space of dialogue where everyone

teaches and learns. While the banking model of education serves to confirm and reproduce, the problem-posing method questions and creates. English teachers must promote a classroom environment where critical questions are welcomed and tackled together.

Alastair Pennycook (2004) provides some helpful distinctions among the multiple understandings of the word "critical." His article "Critical Moments in a TESOL Praxicum" recounts his observation of teaching practice and includes part of a conversation between him and the student teacher about her repeating a student-given form and subsequently modeling the non-standard form "to close the tap" (instead of "to turn off the tap"). In this context, he uses "the notion of critical ... as a form of *problematizing practice*" (2001, cited in Pennycook, p. 329), a process of questioning power and inequality in the classroom without relying on any pre-packaged answers or defined notions of emancipation and democracy. The use of "to close the tap" was explored from several different perspectives, specific to the local context and needs of the students, and tentatively embraced as positive.

Pennycook (2004) also affirms the importance of "critical as in a critical moment, a point of significance, an instant when things change" (p. 330). The discussion of "to close the tap" was a critical moment for the student teacher in the sense that it was an instance that brought "questions about standards and varieties, local norms, and language use" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 342) to the fore. While the specific expression can hardly be classified as "critical" in any objective-like analysis of English, it represents a moment of unexpected learning with implications for future classes. In language education, such small but critical moments do happen; the teacher's job is to recognize them and explore them rather than simply provide the Standard English answer. The diversity of Englishes can best be addressed in a critical classroom where all participants learn and teach.

<u>Multiculturalism</u>. Thinking about whose English we teach or recognize leads to the second and larger issue of English and multiculturalism. The Course of Study (2008) for junior high school states that class material chosen should raise "students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation" (MEXT, Section 9, II.3.[2].C). Teaching culture is generally considered part of a language teacher's job, and cultural material is included in textbooks. However Ryuko Kubota (2004) asserts that, while many people assume that language teachers are culturally sensitive, the "issues of multicultural education are much more complex than simple respect for cultural difference, appreciation of ethnic traditions and artifacts, or promotion of cultural sensitivity" (p. 31).

Critical pedagogy has often been set in the context of developing countries

or in racially, ethnically diverse classrooms in developed countries, but it belongs in the language classrooms of Japan as well. Kubota (1998) noted almost 20 years ago that English study and internationalization were "so bound up together" (p. 8/13) that speaking English was strangely almost equated with being an international person. As noted above, the new wave of English reform connected to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics continues to make a strong connection between English and globalization (see MEXT, 2014a, 2014b). It is true that study abroad exchanges have increased in China while decreasing in the United States and the United Kingdom (MEXT, 2015a) and that I myself have seen more students doing short-term English programs in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. And recent English textbooks for junior high school do reflect an increased awareness of English use outside countries where English is spoken as a native language (see Hardy, 2011; Brown, 2015). Nevertheless, it is not clear how or whether changes in study abroad locations or textbook contents have significantly exposed the reality that English as an international language benefits English speakers, especially particular English speakers, that speaking English does not a global person make, and that the spread of English does endanger other languages and cultures.

In order to address multiculturalism, teachers should consider integrating different kinds of learning opportunities in their classes rather than simply introducing cultural content. In 1994, a group of educators known as the New London Group met and produced a document (see New London Group, 1996) which suggests ways education should respond to new social realities. Traditional literacy associated with Standard reading and writing is no longer enough for young people living in an increasingly global and technological world. The group's focus was on a pedagogy of Multiliteracies, which ten years later two of its members, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, defined as having the basic goal of creating a situation which leads to the development of people "comfortable with themselves as well as flexible enough to collaborate and negotiate with others who are different to themselves in order to forge a common interest" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2004, p. 9). The goal is similar to MEXT's (2008) goal of affirming Japanese identity while preparing students to engage in a global world.

The New London Group (1996) proposed four dimensions or learning opportunities which they believe should be woven into the classroom. Initially called Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practice, they were later classified as the "knowledge processes" of Experiencing, Conceptualising, Analysing, and Applying (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005, cited in Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 17). They identify two types of Analysing, namely Functional and Critical. The latter "involves evaluation of your own or other

people's perspectives, interests and motives" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 18). In addition to providing time for real use of the language (Experiencing), direct teaching of language elements (Conceptualising), and connection with communities outside the classroom (Applying), opportunities for stepping away from the language, for questioning whose views are represented in it and whose views are not, are of equal importance. Although integrating critical thinking may be challenging and potentially controversial, silence on issues of language and power only serves to support the status quo. Teachers can never be "apolitical technician[s]" (Kubota, 1998, p. 8/13) and should help students begin to see the relationship between language and power.

3. Conclusion

I have experienced success and failure in CLT classrooms that encourage students to do a good deal of legwork "to earn their supper." When students have hesitated to embrace use and learner responsibility, to participate or to make decisions about class content, or to express their own opinions, I have wondered if I were imposing some truly incompatible pedagogical approaches in addition to doing my job of teaching English. However, although I do accept that particular approaches or methods may not work with specific groups of students, I think there is great diversity within every culture and believe that there are instances of various pedagogical approaches, even if we have to look outside the classroom and into the community to find them. Before concluding that a method like CLT is inappropriate for certain Japanese students, as it may be, teachers must provide proper orientation.

I also believe that careful reflection on teaching approaches and methods should lead teachers to promote questioning in the English classroom. In addition to teaching the four skills, educators have a responsibility to embrace language diversity and the teacher-student/student-teacher model in the classroom, as well as to encourage critical thinking in relation to language and culture and power in order to respond more fully to the MEXT (2008) initiative to educate students for a global world.

I would honestly still rather have someone prepare food for me when I eat out. It is what I expect; plus, I lack confidence, think someone else will do it "right," and am sometimes just a little bit lazy. Becoming aware of why I do not like cook-it-yourself dining, though, has helped me identify my own weaknesses and also imagine the feelings of some students in communication classrooms. In this essay I have tried to address student expectations; questions of confidence and motivation should be further investigated. I have also tried to argue the importance

of a critical perspective in the classroom in relation to language varieties and multiculturalism. Perhaps taking the time to articulate the good points of an *okonomiyaki* night out will help students see the benefits of a classroom where shared learning can spark a unique creation. In the new semester, I plan to begin by asking student to explain to me the joys of cooking when they eat out.

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（信州大学 全学教育機構 外国語講師）

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