

Gender Awareness in EFL

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Abstract

The aim of this short paper is to provide an example of classroom application of the concept of gender roles within the broader framework of Gender Awareness. More generally, it attempts to introduce growing interest in Gender Awareness within the context of changing perspective on Language Learning. What is understood by “gender roles” or “gender domain” will be examined. Explicit and traditional concept of gender roles will be briefly discussed with the relationship between explicit and implicit or covert knowledge about gender and gender roles in EFL in Japan.

Gender Awareness has become a major concern in language education. There has been a lot of discussion of Gender Awareness both in relation to the language development of students and in connection with the study of language teachers’ attitudes toward gender issues.

Introduction

Language learning for growing as a mature person inevitably includes Gender Awareness. Although it should be recognized as true, the statement is not a little controversial. What makes it so is that what we, every EFL teacher, think of “gender awareness” is not yet clarified for ourselves. To define it is not easy as it looks.

English is taught for cross-cultural communication at various levels. The students want to develop cross-cultural understanding. English is almost always the compulsory foreign language. It is also the one to torment them most because of the assignments they were given are varied in terms of purposes, because the assignments are designed to enhance the students’ EFL proficiency and at the same time to raise the awareness of internal, not international, cultural difference. There is

a lot of emotional, sometimes very crucial reaction to the task.

For the past few decades, EFL teachers have been trying to incorporate gender issues into the curriculums. Our efforts have led to the development of not a few numbers of interrelated fields of human rights education and global education within the framework of EFL.

While it cannot be denied that the gender issue and gender “literacy” are important, there are certain risks inherent in gender awareness education. Can EFL teachers be informative or simply dogmatic? That is the question.

There are two main reasons for the fragility of the notion of gender awareness in EFL. One is that we are not sure about our own awareness. In every gender issue, as well as in global, cultural issues, one is inevitably personally biased. There always is the risk of indoctrination by the teacher. In other words, teachers’ awareness might be inadequate. Therefore there is tension between the traditional, culturally “straight”, view and the more progressive elements of cultural education.

Although more moderate views are reflected in the state of art of EFL today, there is another reason that the gender education is at stake. It is the question whether the gender awareness leads to the better comprehension of English language per se. If the aim of the course is to develop language proficiency, is it fair, or at least reasonable, to include gender issues in the EFL program? It is inevitable that the criticisms are raised against the gender issue educators as language teachers if the introduction of the issues does not contribute to the EFL proficiency development.

It is no doubt that teaching English language is closely connected to the cultural educational issues. English, or any one particular language represents the speakers’ culture, history, and future dreams. Therefore any material is inevitably culturally biased. Screen English is no exception. To learn English through popular Hollywood movies is inevitably to face the Anglo-American culture. Screen English is, no doubt, one of the most popular and effective learning aids, at the same time it is the essence of cultural products which represents their value. Hollywood movies, especially, are a representation of their cultural and historical values of Anglo-American society. On the other side of the Pacific-rim, it is inevitable to consume the Hollywood product either as a form of entertainment or the one of the best material for language teaching. Thus the simple question is if we use these culturally biased materials as a good teaching material for culture education. This short paper is to report an in-class

project to use Hollywood movies as materials for teaching cultural/global issues (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004).

The study

The purpose of this study is to help Japanese male English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) college students construct the concept of gender equality by watching and responding to a popular Hollywood movie: *leadership and resolution*. It has long been the interest of educational researchers how and when to promote the concept and practice of gender equality in education. To date it has not been properly accomplished in the Japanese college education and it has been the subject of some controversy.

Eighteen Japanese EFL student athletes participated in the study. Questionnaire responses, oral interviews were used to gather data for this paper. The results indicated that EFL college student athletes, for various reasons, responded positively to the use of the two gender issues, although these issues did not improve their language proficiency in English dramatically but promoted their critical responses to the concept of gender equality. Some pedagogical implications are suggested for classroom practice, namely: EFL teachers should become gender attentive as teaching itself can be a means of learning and promoting gender equity.

Participants

Participants were eighteen Japanese student athletes in a college of a large-scale private university, majoring in business management and commerce. They were students who were admitted to the college by their performance and good records in the high school in various sports, e.g. speed skating, wrestling, football, rather than their academic performance. Many of them are top-level athletes competing at national level. They were not screened by entrance examination; therefore, their EFL proficiency levels are, in most cases, severely inferior to that of other students. However, in the current system of the college in which this study was executed, students are allowed to register for any EFL courses regardless of their proficiency levels. Thus, many of them are in intermediate programs although they should be in the beginners program or even lower ones. There is no proficiency test given at whatever level. It is not technically possible to give a level check test before they

register for each program either. They are among the other students of two classes the author teaches. Each of them consists of 40 students. Eight and ten amongst 40 are rather a large population.

Materials and Treatment

A popular Hollywood film, *Elizabeth: the Golden Age* was shown in three installments, highlighting the roles of Elizabeth as a female leader of England. This film was chosen because it is depicting a historical moment of the British; it was a good material for the class as a material of cultural study. Although details of historical accuracy were somewhat sacrificed for the dramatic effects, the overall story of the film traced the course of history. Since the main character, the leader of Britain, is female, it was assumed not to fit the male chauvinistic views and values. The film was trimmed and shown to the class in three installments as parts of normal class. They were dealt as a source of discussion. The first installment is an introduction, depicting a luxurious side of the court. The second one depicts Elizabeth I's conflict with the Spanish and agony as a lonely queen. The last one, the climax, presents Elizabeth as a resolute female leader of the nation.

Procedures

The film installments were shown after a brief, mainly historical, introduction by the teacher/author. Then, the students were put into small groups of 5-8 for discussion. During the discussion session, the progress was carefully monitored and recorded by the author. After the classes were over, additional interviews, posed as casual chatting, were given to the athletes. They were intended to let them say their real feeling about the film and gender roles. With their permissions, the contents of the interviews were written down for the record. They were assured that their views would not affect their grades for the program.

The results

An interesting observation is that as the film goes into the climax, the athletes' sympathy to the queen increased. On the initial viewing of the introduction, the luxurious court life made them cynical and even offended. For them it was just

another different world. In the group discussion, although they were usually very quiet and shy in expressing themselves, they candidly admitted that they had biased view upon gender domain. They told, unanimously, that they would not believe that a woman can be their coach, to say nothing of the leader of a nation, in the after-the-class chatting.

An interesting change their attitude toward Elizabeth was observed after viewing the second installment. The athletes started to identify themselves to the agonized, fighting queen. Some of them said they could understand how she *felt* as the leader of the armed forces. The leadership of the queen appealed to the athletes. When asked which scene was most impressive, most frequent answer nominated the scene in which the queen practically declared the end of diplomatic relationship with Spain. She shouted out loudly to the exiting Spanish delegates. Interestingly enough, this scene did not appeal to other students. Some female students, especially, thought that the queen overreacted a little and even hysterical.

The climax scene, with Elizabeth in full metal armor on the white horse, received unanimous applause from all students. She encouraged the battalion of army, declaring that she would lead them and fight with them to the end. Although the Spanish force was more than enough to annihilate the entire English force at one blow, this appearance appealed the soldiers in the film. It also appealed to the students. An interesting finding from observation was that many students were impressed by the declaration of the queen that she would be the *mother* of England. It is intriguing that motherhood and femininity at the scene of war appealed to the young audience.

Discussion

How could a gender issues be introduced into EFL classroom? That is a question. Especially, when the teacher (in this case the author of this study) him/herself may possess a biased-opinion about gender roles, it is very difficult to decide whether to introduce this issue at all. In terms of this small scale study, it was quite a lucky coincidence that the author had classes including one with the eighteen athletes. As a research, there lies the very weakness of this study. Since the study was done as a post-hoc analysis of an ordinary class program, there is a lot of contamination of data and there is almost no control over the subject-selection and procedures. The whole study was executed in an ordinary class program; it was not

possible and ethical to give too much control and that is the limitation of this study. This is the dilemma which most of the researcher/teacher inevitably face. The class should be pedagogically effective. No placebo should be given without the breach of our prime directive as educators, for example.

As the study may lead to a possibility to a more efficient and effective introduction of gender issues into EFL, it may be worth considering what should be done to improve the current study. First, there should be tighter control over the subject selection, which would enable comparison between male-female EFL learners' concepts of gender domain, not just highlighting the eccentricity of the male athlete students. In addition, there should have been some measurement which would enable quantitative analysis of the degrees of the depth and width of the stereo-typical views on gender domains. If it was not to disturb the natural course of the class, questionnaire, with Likart scale should have been introduced instead of open discussion. Comparison between the three groups, namely male, female and male-chauvinistic athletes would be intriguing. Also, it should be kept in mind that the female students do not compose a uniform value group. Not a few female students considered Elizabeth pushed too hard. More in-depth and precise portrait of the subjects would be inevitable in the future research.

Conclusion

As far as this limited small scale study concerned, an adequate introduction of gender issue material into an EFL classroom gives positive effect upon gender domain understanding.

References

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