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The Politics and Ideology of Second Language Writing: A Reflection of an Educator

第２言語ライティングの政策とイデオロギー：教育者の振り返り

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores how teaching experiences and context have influenced his approach to teaching second language writing. The paper provides a reflective account of the author's changing contexts of instruction and its influence on both his teaching goals and instructional approach. The first part of this paper the author provides a brief introduction to the issues of ideology in second language instruction. Next, the author provides an account of his experience as an English writing instructor in Japan, which involves multiple contexts, differing curriculum goals, and several constraints. Then, the author provides arguments regarding the three main ideological approaches to teaching L2 writing, including critical pedagogy, accomodationist pragmatic, and critical pragmatic. Finally, the author reflects upon his experiences and contexts and discusses his beliefs and approach to second language writing instruction.

Key words: Second Language Acquisition, English Writing Instruction, Ideology, Pedagogy

I　Introduction

Over the past few decades, there have been debates within the field of second language (L2) regarding the political and ideological nature of writing instruction. On one side of the argument, there are those that argue that education is by nature a political and ideological endeavor (Benesch, 1993; Canagarajah, 2002; Pennycook, 1989; Shor, 1992). According to this view, instructors bring an agenda to the classroom whether implicitly or explicitly. Essentially, from this perspective there is no such thing as politically neutral instruction. They further argue that the teaching of the English language itself to groups of immigrants, minorities, and in countries around the world is fraught with issues of economic, political, and ideological power, given the role of English as the global language of commerce and communication. Therefore, it is argued that L2 writing instructors need not only to be aware of these issues, but also provide opportunities for learners to question and challenge the status quo of this power structure. If all of our choices as

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instructors are political and ideological in nature, then those choices should be geared toward empowering learners and embracing their diversity.

However, on the other side of this debate there are those who argue that the main goal for both instructors and learners is to improve second language proficiency and prepare learners for situations or environments in which they need the language to achieve their communicative goals (Horowitz, 1986b; Santos, 1992, 2001). Those who argue this position do not necessarily deny the political nature of English language education, but instead believe that helping students become successful in the target language should be the priority and that instructors should avoid or at the very least minimize any kind of political agenda in the classroom. Furthermore, others have argued (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996b) that education concerning individuality and critical thinking, which are considered important ideals of challenging the status quo in Western cultures, should not necessarily be imposed upon non-Western cultures. From this perspective, helping learners improve their proficiency is the main role of an instructor in a language classroom.

Whichever side L2 writing educators lean toward will ultimately influence decisions they make in the classroom regarding approaches to teaching writing, choosing topics and assignments, as well as decisions about assessment. Therefore, it is essential that L2 writing instructors reflect often on their own stances toward these issues. Casanave (2004) calls upon all L2 writing educators “to be fully aware of these issues, to reflect regularly on their own stances, and to remain open to discussion and other views” (p. 198). Furthermore, instructors need to understand their own views of these issues within the particular local contexts that they teach. In other words, these views need to be carefully examined along with contextual variables including things such as learner population, learner proficiency, learner goals, as well as institutional curriculum and goals. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to provide a reflective examination of myself as an educator and L2 writing instructor and how history, context, and beliefs have influenced my approach to teaching L2 writing.

II　My Experience as a Writing Educator

My first time teaching a second language writing course was as a part time-teacher at a coordinated English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in a department of policy studies at a large private university in Western Japan. Although aspects of the program did integrate social policy issues into the curriculum, the overall goal was to prepare students to take content courses taught in English by the foreign tenured faculty in the department. During my experience in this program, students were expected to write academic essays grappling with a variety of social issues, with topics ranging from school uniforms, co-educational schools, to donating to developing countries, as well as options for higher proficiency students to choose their own research topics. Although some of the higher proficiency students were able to write well developed essays on these topics, I felt that a large group of students struggled with balancing

the linguistic challenge of writing in a second language with learning the discourse of academic writing as well as the intellectual challenge of the topics. I often felt that the priority of the content of the topics and the goal of teaching academic style writing were favored at the expense of more practice with basic skills in writing.

A few years later, I accepted my first full time contract job in a similar EAP type program in a different department at the same university. The main difference being the job entailed preparing students to study abroad in universities in English-speaking countries. Because many of the students were of a relatively high level of English language proficiency, I was able to continue to integrate content-related material into my teaching. However, I also tried to balance content-oriented writing with more fluency-oriented writing, such as journal and blog writing. This gave students an opportunity to practice writing on topics related more to their own lives such as clubs, part-time jobs, friends, family, and holidays. This type of writing lowers the cognitive load and allows learners to focus on writing more freely without having to gather research, formulate opinions, and utilize academic discourse. Furthermore, I also included more focus on genre-related grammar and sentence structures, focusing on structures useful for genres such as opinion, argumentative, and comparison. One of the things I realized during this time, was that content could be at the forefront of the EFL classroom, provided that students have the opportunity to focus on other writing skills in conjunction with writing academic essays. This provides a balance of content and skills.

With the end of my first contract job looming over me, I used my experience to apply for another full-time contract job at a national university in Western Japan as a writing course coordinator for students preparing for careers related to maritime sciences. My task in this position was to create a curriculum that would provide students the basic skills required to continue to study in English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses for maritime English. During the four years I taught there, I had the opportunity to enact my beliefs about L2 writing into a living curriculum that effected nearly 200 students and six classes taught by six different writing instructors. In the writing courses, I included an extensive reading component, as well as a sentence-combining program. The extensive reading was designed to provide an input-oriented approach that would expose students to familiar vocabulary, grammatical and syntactic sentence structures. The sentence-combining program provided practice in writing longer, more complex sentences with target syntactic structures. Although the English was geared toward improving basic skills, there were still occasional opportunities for content-oriented topics as well as critical thinking. For example, one writing assignment asked students to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the English education system in Japan. Overall, the curriculum I created at this school was focused on basic and field-specific English skills, but there were also opportunities within the curriculum to include issues that required more critical reflection.

More recently, in the spring of 2017 I was able to land my first tenure-track job at a small private university. During my first semester at this school, I was quickly confronted with teaching writing to students who could be categorized as false-beginners. This again provided

new challenges that I had not encountered previously in my career as a writing instructor. These students desperately needed basic writing skills, but were also expected to write about three content-oriented curriculum-related themes including “Cool Japan”, “Traditional Japan”, “Local Social Issues”, and “Social International Issues”. My approach to teaching these students included practice with basic grammatical structures, journal writing, and a scaffolded approach to academic writing. Often, I would teach basic academic writing structures using a simple topic first, such as friends, family, hobbies, and vacations before repeating the process with a topic-related to the curriculum themes. In addition, sentence-combining and translation writing practice were used to focus on developing new syntactic patterns as well as on developing grammatical accuracy in writing. In sum, my approach to teaching second language writing so far at this institution involved focusing on both bottom-up and top-down skills with lots of scaffolding.

Overall, each context has presented me with new challenges and forced me to adopt new approaches to my teaching. As Casanave (2004) notes, “teachers’ decisions flow from the specifics of their local contexts in conjunction with their beliefs and their understandings of the issues” (p. 199). Therefore, as someone with the ability to influence L2 writing pedagogy, it is important and necessary for me to stop and reflect on the kind of decisions I am making in the classroom and the changes I want to make to curriculum. Moreover, it is an opportunity as a researcher to come to grips with my own ontological and epistemological beliefs. This paper is an attempt to articulate my beliefs and understandings of the issues surrounding L2 pedagogy and research, with a more specific focus on writing.

III　Three Main Ideological Positions

In the debate over ideology and politics in L2 education, there are generally two sides of the argument. On one side is critical pedagogy and on the other side is the accommodationist pragmatism. The position of critical pedagogy is best summed up by Benesch (1993), when she argued “all forms of ESL instruction are ideological, whether or not educators are conscious of the political implications of their instructional choices” (p. 705). This belief is shared by several other researchers in the field (Canagarajah, 2002; Pennycook, 1989, 1994; Shor, 1992). From this perspective, L2 pedagogy can never be neutral or objective. For that reason, rather than pretending to be ideologically free, L2 educators should make their positions clear and avoid upholding a system of education that perpetuates an unjust status quo. English, as the dominant international language, is complicit in maintaining an unjust economic and political power structure that often marginalizes and subjugates the voices of minorities. Critical pedagogues argue, therefore, that researchers and teachers in the field of English language education should work toward social transformation by encouraging learners to openly question, resist, and challenge the status quo.

In regard to L2 writing, critical pedagogy is often directed at EAP in order to transform existing educational institutions and practices of the dominant Anglo-American academy. In

L2 pedagogy, this often means challenging the dominant discourse conventions of academia. For example, Ivanič (1998) makes the distinction between *natural* and *naturalized* discourse conventions, noting that the former creates the illusion of a normal state whereas the latter sees it as "the product of relations of power" (p. 81). The distinction here is that the dominant discourse conventions are socially constructed and therefore open to contest and change by learners. For example, in the negotiation model (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 590) of L2 writing, the differences between learners writing and discourse conventions are not viewed as errors in need of correction, but rather evidence of a conscious representation of a writers' preferred values and/or identity. In this way, writers regain a sense of agency and ownership in their own writing. One of the consequences of the dominant discourse from the critical perspective is the fact that it often limits the participation of non-English users in the international research community. Therefore, McKay (1993), in her discussion of L2 composition ideology, implores L2 writing teachers to ask not only *what* we want to teach, but also *why*. McKay argues that one of the most important questions in L2 writing instructors should be considering is "what is gained by asking students to master the social practices of Western academic discourse that support a particular orientation toward knowledge?" (p. 76).

Although these critiques provoked a lot of fruitful discussion regarding L2 writing instruction, critical EAP often falls victim to the same criticism that is leveled at critical pedagogy. First, the idea that all forms of instruction are political has been accused of oversimplification with Santos (2001) asserting that such a belief is "as falsely reductive as any other all-encompassing claim about humans" (p. 181). In addition, critical pedagogy is often attacked for simply pointing out problems while failing to provide few if any satisfying alternatives or ideas that are operationalizable in the classroom. Furthermore, Clark (1992) charged that replacing more traditional pedagogy with critical pedagogy simply represented "moving from one kind of prescriptivism to another" (p. 135). In some cases, critical pedagogy can become dogmatic and judgmental, thus falling into the same trap it accuses mainstream educators of falling into. This also often takes the form of instructors advancing their own political agenda, with very little reflection in the course curriculum of what students see as their own educational needs. Finally, critical pedagogy assumes that all learners are oppressed. Whereas Benesch (1993) is writing from the perspective of an ESL instructor working with immigrant populations in the United States, questions remain as to whether or not the same issues apply to EFL contexts or international students studying abroad. These students often represent the wealthy elite of their respective countries who do not necessarily desire to integrate into the culture of a foreign country.

On the other side of the spectrum is the accommodationist pragmatic view, which according to Santos (1992) should place "emphasis on the cognitive, academic, and pedagogical rather than on the sociopolitical" (p. 12). From this perspective, L2 pedagogy should aim to help learners achieve their personal goals, which can include studying foreign language for the purposes of studying abroad, advancing their career, and working and/or living overseas. Therefore, the role of the language instructor is to teach the conventional discourse efficiently, with a primary

focus on building language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, some accommodationist pragmatists argue that by avoiding teaching conventions, educators will only further marginalize learners (Elbow, 1991). The argument can generally be summed up in the belief that educators have an ethical duty to prepare and equip learners with the skills to survive in personal, professional, or academic L2 environments.

As for L2 writing pedagogy, pragmatic educators strive to help learners achieve success in real writing challenges they face from essay exams, to school reports, to writing business documents and composing emails. Therefore, the role of the writing instructor is to provide opportunities for what Horowitz (1986a) called "realistic simulations". In other words, the tasks performed in the writing classroom should reflect the tasks learners are expected to perform in real life situations. Not all pragmatists believe that teaching the dominant discourse conventions is apolitical (Swales, 1997), but rather they believe that the overwhelming priority should be to move the learner further along the path toward higher levels of proficiency.

Although pragmatism attempts to provide results that are applicable to real world environments, it often avoids issues of ideology and politics in favor of focusing on mastery of norms and conventions. This attempt to adopt a neutral form of pedagogy is problematic to critical pedagogues because they believe that all decisions educators make reflect political positions. Benesch (1993) articulates this point of view when stating that "educators who do not acknowledge or discuss their ideology are not politically neutral; they simply do not highlight their ideology" (p. 706). As a consequence, critics charge that the unexamined functional efficiency of pragmatism is simply an endorsement of the status quo, thus perpetuating the oppression of an unjust power structure. Not only does pragmatism pretend to be neutral, but critics also believe it claims to be universal by adhering to standard conventions. In doing so, pragmatism ignores the social, cultural, and local knowledge that learners possess and bring to the language classroom.

Despite what initially appears to be a lack of middle ground between these the two dominant positions in L2 pedagogy, there is actually a surprising amount of agreement between the two positions. Both camps agree that students should be exposed to the dominant discourse conventions to some degree. Instructors from both sides want student writing to improve. Both sides believe that education can be empowering and that teachers are more than what Pennycook (1990) described as "classroom technicians" (p. 310). Rather, both the critical pedagogues and the pragmatists are often attacking the most extreme positions in the opposing camp rather than focusing on areas of compromise. It is from this area of compromise that critical pragmatism grew as an approach that attempts to bridge the best of both worlds.

According to Harwood and Hadley (2004), critical pragmatism attempts to "combine the restive questioning of Critical EAP (while avoiding its more reactionary elements), with the focus on dominant discourse norms which a pragmatic approach stresses" (p. 366). This approach strives to help students achieve functional and instrumental goals while simultaneously encouraging learners to question and challenge the status quo. This involves both exposing learners to the norms and conventions of a language while also providing learners with linguistic

options to choose from, therefore acknowledging the right to difference. To some degree, the critical pragmatic perspective is in line with other critical pedagogues (Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 1990) in accepting that there is room for educators to do more than simply skill training. Therefore, educators from this perspective should balance training students with the necessary skills to increase proficiency, raise awareness of inequalities and injustice, and occasionally provide opportunities for self-empowerment.

Critical Pragmatism can be achieved in L2 writing in several ways. One example is seen in Clark's (1992) acceptability categories, which delineate areas where it is acceptable to flout the norms and conventions and areas where it should be avoided. For instance, Clark rejects the notion that the personal voice should be avoided in favor of an objective voice in academic writing. In some cases, the personal voice cannot be separated from the subject, even leading some researchers in the field to advocate the use of the first-person plural "we" voice (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2002). On the other hand, certain conventions of academic writing must be adhered to such as avoiding plagiarism and standard referencing. Canagarajah's negotiation model, described above, allows learners to bring their own discourse and knowledge to academic writing. Although Santos (2001) does not advocate its use for resisting the dominant discourse, he does note that professors are often willing to be more flexible toward students from different language backgrounds and this is contributing to the pluralization of academic discourse. A third example is in Harwood and Hadley's (2004) use of corpus-based frequency counts to provide learners with models of language use. This gives learners choices in regard to what is more commonly and less commonly used and enables them to decide whether or not they want to follow more or less conventional uses.

IV My L2 Writing Ideology

After exploring three of the main ideological approaches to L2 writing instruction, I am left to figure out where I position myself along the continuum between critical pedagogy on one end and accommodationist pragmatism on the other. This naturally leads me to reflect on my instructional choices and how these reflect my local context, beliefs, and understanding of the issues in L2 writing pedagogy.

One thing I do believe in is allowing learners a level of autonomy in writing. This often comes in the form of allowing my students to choose their own topics. I believe in providing some degree of autonomy even in something as seemingly innocuous as a writing topic. Allowing learners to write about what they are interested in and familiar with is both motivating and rewarding. As writing in a second language is a highly cognitively demanding endeavor, encouraging students to choose topics that they have some knowledge of reduces the cognitive load as well as gives value to the knowledge learners bring to the classroom. When I do provide writing topics, I often like to choose topics that encourage critical thinking. One recent topic I assigned for a blog writing

task asked students to explain whether or not English is important for their life or their future. The overwhelming message from Japanese society is that English is important, which is evident in the years of compulsory classes, questions regarding English language knowledge on university entrance exams, and TOEIC score requirements for career positions in Japanese companies. As a writing educator, I am just as pleased to see a well-written response challenging this accepted belief as I am with a response that supports it.

Another element of my L2 writing instruction is empowering learners by decentralizing the teacher as the knowledge center. In my classroom, there are lots of opportunities for peer teaching through pair work and group work. I feel that some concepts of L2 writing instruction are better learned through negotiating knowledge with peers in either their L2 or L1. I also integrate both self and peer review into process writing tasks. For example, my rubrics often include checklists and/or self-evaluations in order to encourage learners to critically examine their own writing before submitting. Peer reviews put learners in the role of an evaluator and provide an opportunity to apply their own knowledge and skills in order to help their classmates. Last, I often provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning and progress. For example, after completing a composition they will write about what they learned through the process, what they did not understand, what they want to improve in the future, or any questions or comments they may have related to the course. Many Japanese learners are socialized to not challenge instructors, or simply do not have confidence to confront their instructors. Therefore, providing a non-confrontational space to speak about their concerns gives them more of a voice in the classroom and agency over their own education.

Although I do believe that elements of critical thinking and social learning are important for the L2 writing classroom, I feel that proficiency should be a priority, especially for lower proficiency students. I often focus on increasing student writing proficiency through tasks such as sentence-combining and sentence translation. These activities often reflect a more traditional form of pedagogy in which learners independently work through a series of sentence level exercises. It is often characterized as a type of drill, which is denounced in some circles of educators as a form of behaviorism. However, I believe that distributed practice can make some procedures more automatic, thus freeing up limited cognitive resources to focus on higher order thinking such as critical analysis or problem solving. Moreover, once students build up a repertoire of grammatical and syntactic options, they are more able to choose sentence structures that help them express more clearly and precisely what they want to say. Grammar is fundamental to written communication, and sentence-combining and translation practice provide a systematic way of building grammar knowledge through playful attention to sentence level construction.

V Conclusion

Through evaluating the main ideological positions in L2 writing and reflecting upon my own practices and beliefs, I find myself positioned somewhere between critical pragmatism and pragmatism, although probably a little closer toward the latter. I sometimes feel that educators on the far end of spectrum of critical pedagogy are putting the proverbial cart before the horse. From my perspective, students are most empowered through proficiency and the ability to use the language for their own desired purposes, whether for a career, a lifestyle, a new identity, or social transformation. In my own experience of working in Japanese institutions, my path to empowerment and educational transformation to me is clearly through my ability to master the discourse of the Japanese language. Therefore, I believe as a language educator that helping learners become as proficient as possible should be the main priority.

This is not to say that critical pedagogy does not have a role in academia. I see critical pedagogy as providing a conscience to education and forcing teachers to rethink and evaluate their pedagogical decisions. Furthermore, I do believe that issues related to critical thinking and social transformation have a place in the language curriculum. In my view as learners become more proficient, they should be challenged to apply their linguistic skills toward empowering themselves. Finally, I agree with critical pedagogy in the sense that educators are not ideologically neutral. However, I do believe that some approaches are more neutral than others. I agree that educators should not avoid ideology and politics in the classroom. While instructors are helping learners become more proficient, they should simultaneously raise awareness of political realities. Furthermore, they should create opportunities for students to take control of the agenda rather than pushing their own. Ultimately, I believe educators should leave it to students to decide for themselves whether to use their knowledge and skills to question, resist, or challenge the political realities they face.

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