

Summer 8-18-2012

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Opus Citation

Mieko Yamada (2012). *Awareness of internal diversity and implications for teaching English in Japan*. Presented at Society for the Study of Social Problems, Denver, CO.

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Awareness of internal diversity and implications for teaching English in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The diversification of English-speaking settings has stressed the importance of cross-cultural and intercultural communication in the field of second/foreign language education (Curtis and Romney 2006; Herman 2007; Honna, 2000, 2008; Kubota 2002; Kubota and Lin 2006, 2009; Kubota and McKay 2009; Nakamura 2004). In globalized societies, people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are increasingly required to communicate through English. Concomitantly, varieties of culture and language backgrounds among native and non-native speakers of English create multicultural and multilingual interactions. Therefore, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are now urged to not only pursue language proficiency but also understand the social contexts behind the language.

Particularly, the use of English has become essential in non-Anglo-American cultural contexts for both international and intranational communication (Honna, 2000, 2008). There is a perception about English uses and users. While native speakers of English often think that English is their property, non-native speakers tend to believe that they should subject to the way native speakers do (Honna 1995; Matsuda 2002, 2003). This colonial perception would keep non-native speakers of English in a marginalized position and further induce confusion or resistance toward the English users and uses in non-Anglo-American contexts. As a result, this misunderstanding creates prejudices about English speakers and possibly reproduces a racial/ethnic and linguistic hierarchy. To promote successful interactions through English, specific approaches of teaching skills and attitudes for communicating with non-English speakers urgently need to be discussed (Kubota and McKay 2009).

This study investigates the extent to which Japanese university students learned about diverse countries and individuals through the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum. More

specifically, it examines to what extent Japanese university students learn about race and ethnic diversity in their secondary EFL classes and how they understand domestic cultural diversity within Japan. Based on the survey and interview data, this paper will present how these students perceive the domestic cultural diversity of Japan and the role of EFL education. The ultimate goal of this argument is not only to raise awareness of racial and ethnic diversity within Japan but also to reduce prejudice and discrimination against particular groups and/or individuals. To promote successful cross-cultural communication, I emphasize that diversity issues (e.g., conflict, tension, and inequality) need to be taught explicitly within the EFL curriculum. Given stimulating ideas provided by the university students, this paper hopes to suggest new directions for incorporating multicultural perspectives in the EFL classes in non-Anglo American contexts, e.g., Japan.

The previous studies of the Japanese EFL textbook representations (Hino 1988; Matsuda 2002; Yamada 2006, 2010, 2011) reported that Japanese cultural content was most commonly included in the EFL textbooks. Furthermore, through the analysis of the representation of race and ethnic diversity in the EFL junior high school textbooks published by a major Japanese publisher, Yamada (2006, 2010, 2011) found that while the ethnic diversity of Japan and the world has been increasingly represented in those textbooks, the diversity of racial/ethnic groups was not fully expressed in them. This insufficient attention to the racial and ethnic diversity represented in textbooks has motivated this study to pursue further questions. What do Japanese EFL students learn in the EFL curriculum to cultivate ‘the understanding of language and culture’ and ‘a positive attitude toward communication’ (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] 2004: 90)? To what extent do they learn about race and ethnicity and understand Japan’s diversity? How do they perceive Japan’s domestic diversity? To answer these questions in order to extend and deepen previous investigations, I will examine how Japanese students who experienced EFL classes have understood the idea of multiculturalism in Japan and perceived its domestic diversity.