
Have You Ever Heard of Ogino Ginko? Japanese Women in History as Role Models for Language Learners

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Feminist pedagogy is now receiving growing interest among EFL educators, creating a real need for translating it into actual plans and activities for the language classroom. In this paper, the author describes a method to address the need for better representation of women in the EFL classroom in Japan. The goals for the activities outlined are to enable students to (1) learn to critique knowledge itself; (2) gain knowledge of the history and accomplishments of diverse Japanese women who provide strong, capable, and self-determining role models; (3) assume a more active role in their language learning; and (4) develop ideas, skills and strategies which are important for the pursuit of further education, careers and/or social change.

Feminist pedagogy, developed in part as a corrective to the lack of gender analysis within the works of critical pedagogy theorists and practitioners (Jenefsky, 1996), is receiving growing interest among EFL educators in Japan and elsewhere. Indeed, many educators are now realizing that the images and language used in the classroom, as well as the extent to which their learners can identify with them, have an important effect on how well people learn; hence, it stands to reason that if women are under-represented in teaching materials — or represented in demeaning ways — the women who are taught with these materials may learn less well (Florent et al., 1994, p.113).

In Japan, the invisibility and/or stereotypical depiction of women in teaching materials (as well as other media) has contributed to "...the absence of diverse role models who young women can readily look to, identify with, and aspire to emulate" (Fujimura-Fanselow 1995, p. 139). In this paper, I will describe one of the ways I seek, in the language classroom, to offset this imbalance. Informed by feminist pedagogy (Jenefsky, 1996), my goals for the activities to follow are to enable students to do the following: (1) learn to critique knowledge itself; (2) gain knowledge of the history and accomplishments of diverse Japanese women who provide strong, capable, and self-determining role models; (3) assume a more active role in their language learning; and (4) develop ideas, skills and strategies which are important for the pursuit of further education, careers and/or social change.

One thing to note: as the discussion below makes clear, I choose to focus on Japanese women from history as opposed to women from other countries. As my students are Japanese women, I feel they may more readily identify and feel a connection with Japanese women role models. Moreover, I want to avoid "importing" women from Western countries in order to offset another possible imbalance— that of Western cultural imperialism. In addition, I want to avoid the impression that the strength, determination, courage, and other attributes of the women are intrinsically related to their "Westernness." If students attributed too much to a woman's foreign cultural background, they might not be as inspired nor think to themselves "If she did it, maybe I could too." This reaction, incidentally, is one that students have expressed.

Initial Consciousness-Raising Activities

The following activities comprise a unit on “Japanese Women in History” implemented as part of a thematic content-based women’s studies Communicative English course for first-year university students. With the increasing adoption of content-based EFL instruction at the university-level (Brinton et al., 1989; Swain & Miccoli, 1994; Soga, 1998; Wringer, 1998), teachers increasingly have the liberty to select, develop, and adapt authentic materials for their courses. As such, instructors can now ensure that women are not under-represented or depreciated in their course materials. Moreover, a content-based approach in EFL, where discussion is an integral part of the course, is more conducive to critical and feminist pedagogies which emphasize a critical inquiry into one’s social reality.

To introduce this unit, I facilitate a consciousness-raising activity. In groups, students brainstorm and write down as many people from Japanese history as they can think of in five minutes. To create a game-like atmosphere, which students reportedly enjoy a great deal, I bring in a kitchen-timer from home. When the bell goes off students from each group write on the board all the names that they could come up with under the appropriate column “male” or “female.” The group with the most names is the winner. Invariably, for each group there are as many as 22 names under the male column with as few as three under the female column.

Next, I ask the students to look at the board and tell me what they see. Surprisingly the conspicuous gender disparity is not always their first observation. Some students, for example, reply that many of the men listed on the board are government leaders or samurai warriors. I encourage the students to look again and tell me what else they see. Eventually, students will say that the vast majority of people listed are men. Upon asking students why this is so — why most of the names are men — my students’ faces stare back at me with blank or puzzled expressions. One or two students may remark that most of the people on the lists are men because men were more active in history. And when probed further, a student may explain that this is primarily due to the prevailing cultural norm of the times — of *ryosai kenbo* or “good wife, wise mother.” Sometimes a student will comment that this traditional idea of “men in the public world and women in the private world” is discriminatory.

Using an OHP, I then show the students photo prints of various Japanese women mostly from the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods and give them a brief introduction of each. I ask the students if they have ever heard of any of these women. With the exception of perhaps one or two of the 12 women shown, none of the students have heard of any of the women. This has been a consistent response among first and second-year university students over the past three years. I pose the questions to my students: “Why do you think you have never been taught about these women in school? Why have you not read about them in any history texts?” After some urging, one or two students may reply that the majority of historical texts are written by men and thus it is the way history is written which excludes or minimizes women’s contributions.

I emphasize how this kind of discrimination is not peculiar to Japan — it is universal. I share with my students that in school I, too, did not learn about many women in history and that it was only when I started to read on my own that I became aware of the many exceptional and talented women whose contributions to culture, politics, education, science, and society, are obscured.

Through this activity students do seem to gain a more critical perspective of the way history is written. For example, consider one student’s journal reaction to the consciousness-raising activity:

I think that your method was very interesting and effective. At first we did not know your intention. We felt we were playing a game and it was fun. Then we saw almost men’s names on the board. When you showed pictures of Japanese women almost we didn’t know them. Then, I got it! You explained that it was men who wrote most of history. Now I understand discrimination better.

All 12 of the Japanese women I introduce to my students have in common an independent spirit and a determination which helped them struggle with the gender discrimination of the times, achieve their dreams, and set precedents for other women. See Figure 1 below for a sample of the information presented on three of the women.

Presentation Activities and Associated Procedures

A collaborative approach is used for these activities. Students work cooperatively in groups to do the research and to teach the class, through presentations, what they have learned about a particular Japanese woman in history. As students must dig deep to find information about these women, their research skills are strengthened. I introduce them to such resources as the Tokyo Women's Plaza in Omotesando, the National Women's Education Center in Saitama, as well as encourage them to take advantage of other universities, such as Ochanomizu Women's University and the United Nations University. To help guide their research, I give the students a list of questions (see Figure 2 below). They find these research projects very challenging but rewarding as well — particularly when reading other students' very positive responses to their presentations.

I found two things to be very helpful in encouraging students to listen carefully, ask questions and take notes (in English) during other groups' presentations. The first is administering a quiz on presentation content after two or three groups present. Each group is responsible for developing a short quiz based on their oral presentation report. Developing the quiz is an effective way for students to synthesize their material. Moreover, taking the quiz helps them improve their listening skills. They also report that they find it "fun." Finally, having a quiz in the middle of presentations provides a change of pace and helps prevent any one activity from becoming monotonous. The second thing I do to encourage active listening is allowing students to use their notes to help answer the quiz questions. Indeed, I am always impressed with the quality of students' notes — particularly when they pick up on things that I've missed!

A portion of one class is spent teaching the students how to make multiple choice and true-or-false questions. Students bring in the quizzes prior to presentation day and can request assistance for any required revisions. After completing final revisions for homework, students prepare enough copies for class distribution following their group's presentation. Students exchange and mark each other's quizzes in class immediately after taking the quiz. The day's presenting groups go over the quiz questions with the class, solicit answers, and provide correct responses. This allows for a more student-centered approach.

A lottery system is used to decide on what days various groups will present. Depending on class size usually three to four groups present during a 90-minute class. Groups' presentations are to be about 10 minutes of talking time with five minutes for questions and answers.

Adapting Yamashiro & Johnson's (1997) idea of public speaking in EFL course design, at the beginning of the course and throughout, the basics of academic English organization, language use and delivery skills for giving presentations are introduced. Students using tape cassettes in labs and in groups, learn and practice presentation skills, and evaluate themselves and classmates using a rating sheet (also adapted from Yamashiro & Johnson, 1997). Thus, by the time the students conduct their group presentations in class, they will have hopefully learned the skills and increased their confidence in giving presentations. I feel that these skills are potentially empowering. As Yamshiro & Johnson (1997) point out, "public speaking skills are increasingly important for global citizens who must create practical solutions to the world's existing and future problems (p. 16)."

Student Reactions

Are these women role models for my students? Are they really inspired by them? I think their words speak for themselves. Here are some sample journal entries (in the students' own language):

She [Kono Yasui] was studying very hard, so she showed that woman can study about science as a man...She was not married, but I think that she was happy. Because she could continue to study that she likes. I think that woman's happiness is not only marriage.

I respect Toshiwo Takai. She was poor. She worked very hard. She like working. But she hated discrimination. So she did union activities with her companion. She continued a labor movement her lifetime. I respect her way of life. She had her opinion. And she carried out it. She made effort a lot of thing. I want to have my opinion tightly. And I want to live like her. I think women still suffer from discrimination. I think women's rights still have a long way to go. But, I want to make effort solving these problem.

She [Yamashita Rin] had never changed her attitude till people had came to recognize her. I like this because I feel her strong will. And I like that she left home because she struggled with women's role in society. She lived having strong will and she had never been a slave of gender role. Her attitudes set a good example to women in future. I heard everyone's research about a woman. I thought that women is strong, so I'm very happy as a woman.

Conclusion

It is my hope that, through learning about the resistance, the struggles, and the achievements of these women, my students will be inspired both to acquire the courage to dream their own dreams and to struggle to achieve them. At the very least, students will have taught each other and me about the accomplishments of Japanese women in history; furthermore, by doing this, they will have corrected, at least in part, the gender imbalance so prevalent in all our lives.

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