

Thinking beyond stereotypes through critical cultural competence

What this research was about and why it is important

This study investigated the factors behind foreign English teacher (FET) stereotypes within the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Japan and proposed critical cultural competence-building activities as a pedagogical strategy to help students develop cultural flexibility and think beyond the existing stereotypes.

The assumption that English must be taught by native speakers is still prevalent in Japan, where the North American varieties of the language are considered the gold standard of written and spoken English. Particularly, the stereotype can create an additional hurdle for non-native English teachers despite their educational credentials and experience in the increasingly competitive higher education job market. Despite their privileged position, certain stereotypical roles are ascribed to Caucasian FETs, such as being fun and entertaining. As a result, these teachers may struggle to establish a professional career independent from the fun persona attached to them. In addition, female FETs may face an uphill battle while pursuing a full-time career due to the societal expectations resulting from the deep-rooted gender roles, such as wives and mothers. This pressure could mount to the point that some female teachers may end up resigning from their tenured posts to either take a career break or seek part-time university positions. One of the implications of this trend is that female FETs are outnumbered by their male peers. Hence, more students are exposed to male FETs than female FETs, which may further reinforce the already existing gender stereotypes in school settings.

What the researcher did

- Semi-structured interviews were held with Japanese university FETs ($N=8$) from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- The study employed phenomenology which focuses on describing the essence of a phenomenon through the subjects' lived experiences. In this regard, the researcher sought to understand how FET stereotypes influenced the participants through their personal experiences in a wide range of EFL settings and how they made sense of those experiences.
- The interview data were analyzed using the seven steps for interpretative phenomenological analysis. In-vivo coding was used to identify repeated patterns through the participants' own words. This was helpful to attain a deeper understanding of the personal accounts, perspectives, and meanings expressed by the participants.
- During the interviews, the participants reflected on intercultural activities to emphasize the role of critical cultural competence in helping students develop cultural flexibility and learn to think beyond the existing stereotypes.

What the researcher found

- Language teachers could be subject to phenotypical, gender, and personality stereotypes within the Japanese EFL education context.
- English language education in Japan and the way it is perceived by society, in-group members' commitment to collective identity, which provides a shared form of belonging and distinctiveness to those who are perceived as in-group members, and the mass media's reinforcement of out-group stereotypes accounted for the existing stereotypes.

Things to consider

- In order to become a global citizen, one needs to have adequate cultural flexibility to interact with people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- If the goal is to foster globally competent Japanese citizens, CCC must be recognized as an essential part of English language education so that students can develop their intercultural sensitivity along with English language proficiency.

Material, data, open access article: N/A

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