

# APPLIED LINGUISTICS REVISITED: Creating an Empowering Learning Community

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**I**n this paper, I will look into critical applied linguistics (CAL) in two main sections: (1) how CAL has changed my perception of applied linguistics and the world in general; and (2) how I can actualize social transformation taking up a CAL perspective. The first section focuses on how my impression towards applied linguistics has changed, and how I found CAL to be important in my teaching practice in June 2016. It also looks into the production of Japanese textbooks as one of the examples constructed by ideology. The second section focuses on how I would establish an inclusive learning environment as a way to actualize social transformation. Through this paper, I hope to ascertain strong connections existing between critical applied linguistics and applied linguistics and one day become an educator who can bring about positive changes in Japanese schools and society.

## **(1) How CAL has changed my perception of applied linguistics and the world in general**

To begin with my perception towards applied linguistics, as I take the seminar course in applied linguistics as well, I have come to understand that social implications are not the main focus when considering language teaching and language-related issues in the traditional approach. Although at first I assumed language classrooms to be relatively neutral and free of political factors, I now consider them to have strong connections with society, and “a continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action” (Pennycook, 2001, p.3) should be as equally significant as innovative teaching approaches. As my current goal is to become an educator, I aim at becoming one that creates a

cooperative and motivating learning environment, critically thinking about implicit ideologies around me that have influenced learning materials or teaching methods that I use to teach. Being aware of how power might be unconsciously expressed through student-teacher interaction, and the fact that students have different interpretations in regard to what is read and discussed in classes, are indispensable factors I hope to keep in mind.

Considering language teaching, I will move on to how I found CAL to be important in my 3-week teaching practice at my former high school in June 2016. Although most students I taught were interested in English, I immediately realized that various proficiency levels and past experiences existed in the same classroom. In such classrooms, I tried to incorporate pair work and class discussions that may help nurture students' critical thinking skills instead of grammar drills that basically have only one correct answer. I hoped to create an environment where everyone's answers could be valued and make issues mentioned in classrooms relevant to their daily lives. For example, as the textbook chapter I taught was about Table for Two, I had students share about their favorite school lunches during elementary school or come up with strategies to cope with food shortages around the world. As Morgan (1998) maintains community-based pedagogy as "organizing language around experiences that are immediate to students" (qtd. in Pennycook, 2001, p.15), I felt throughout my teaching practice, that incorporating students' past experiences into classes generates a self-reflexive thinking process. I consider this an essential process to create classrooms where students do not regard everything the teacher mentions as absolutely true but are able to carefully examine and establish their own views towards a certain topic. This kind of learning environment may help develop students' critical thinking abilities, one of the indispensable skills of life.

Next, I will look into Japanese textbooks as an aspect of society I feel is strongly connected with ideology. In Japan, only textbooks authorized by MEXT can be used in classrooms (Langham, 2007, p.7), and are governed by rules that create some constraints throughout the production process (p.8). Furthermore, publishers are only allowed to

create textbooks that conform to the Course of Study implemented according to cultural and ideological norms within society (Yamada, 2010, p.496). As Yamada (2010) mentions that ‘diversity’ or ‘differences’ shown in textbooks brings about awareness but not always discussion, it is necessary for students and teachers to be involved in discussions that promote understanding of each other’s struggles and experiences, and ‘shed light on local issues’ (p.503). I feel that, since textbooks are one of the powerful tools that construct students’ knowledge in classrooms, it should be significant for both students and teachers to have a critical view towards these materials because readers may easily consider everything written in them as the absolute truth.

## **(2) How I can actualize social transformation taking up a CAL perspective**

In recent years, Japanese classrooms have become much more linguistically and culturally diverse due to the globalizing society, where students differ greatly in factors such as linguistic ability, motivation, interests, needs, educational background, learning style, age, external pressures, time, and anxiety (Ainslie, 1994). It can thus be maintained that the society surrounding schools and classrooms has profound influence on diverse factors regarding students’ learning. Furthermore, there is a need for teachers to acknowledge “the classroom itself as a social domain, not merely a reflection of the larger society beyond the classroom walls but also as a place in which social relations are played out and therefore a context in which we need to address questions of social power” (Pennycook, 2001, p.138). As Auerbach (1995) suggests that “dynamics of power and inequality show up in every aspect of classroom life,” (qtd. in Pennycook, 2001, p.115) and because classrooms have the power to produce and change identities, (Pennycook, 2001, p.129) I will present how I would actualize social transformation as a teacher by establishing an inclusive learning environment where no student gets left behind. In particular, on account of Auerbach (1995) mentioning the importance of “explicit analysis of the social context outside the classroom” and students’ involvement in establishing “pedagogical choices inside the

classroom,” (qtd. in Pennycook, 2001, p.139) I hope to focus on these two aspects to ascertain political factors that influence students’ learning experiences.

First, to explicitly analyze the social context outside the classroom, I would begin the school year by looking into both the students’ background information (familial, educational, linguistic, cultural, religion, personal interests, etc.) and the social background of the local community, as factors such as family situation, structure, racial backgrounds, school climate, poverty level, and financial resources all have significant influence on education (Social Context of Education, 1997). To give an example, the Aoba Ward in Yokohama City, where I have been living for over 10 years, has the highest number of returnee students of all 18 wards in Yokohama City (青葉区の主なデータ指標, 2016). Reflecting upon my personal experience during elementary and middle school, there were many students around me who had frequently changed schools both inside and outside of Japan due to their father’s business. In addition, the price of housing in the area being relatively high, many of my classmates were from wealthy families and had well-educated parents, who were very eager to send their children to prestigious schools.

Although this kind of background information is beneficial to gain a general understanding of the students’ situation, however, I believe teachers should go beyond that and collect extended information from profound interaction with students, colleagues, parents, and the local community, listening to their individual voices. In addition, since every student has wide-ranging personalities, experiences, and backgrounds, which cannot be analyzed from quantitative data research only, I hope to incorporate profound opportunities during class for teachers and students to share their personal experiences and backgrounds and acknowledge each other’s strengths and weaknesses. My aim is to establish an inclusive learning environment where “students are seen, valued, cared for, and respected” so that students could learn from one another’s experiences (Critical Practices, 2014, p.8) and be proud of their wide-ranging identities, by incorporating teaching strategies and activities that could create such an environment. For instance, “classroom-reflective texts

coupled with nonjudgmental dialogue,” (p.8) where the teacher uses texts that relate to the classroom demographics and look into the readings through discussions and writing assignments is something I hope to incorporate in my own teaching. This process is thought to benefit teachers as well, as they learn about “students’ hopes, concerns, strengths and life circumstances” (p.8) and this kind of knowledge could be used by teachers to establish rapport, crucial for students’ active participation and joy of learning. Furthermore, as I conduct my lessons, I hope to keep a teaching journal to write down any beneficial information about the students or utterances that students made throughout the lesson to make further improvements in the subsequent classes. I hope to constantly keep a critical eye towards my own teaching so that I do not focus too much on a certain type of student or regard a certain teaching approach to be the absolute way to conduct classes.

Second, to involve students in making pedagogical decisions, I would create opportunities for student-centered learning and decision-making, which allows students to explore their own interests to develop self-autonomy and critical thinking skills. According to a study conducted by Wang and Stiles (1976), students who were given some choices regarding what they learn and when to do the required assignments tended to “complete more learning tasks in less time” (qtd. in Kohn, 1993). In addition, being able to think critically and make choices are skills that will be required when they start working and such skills should be nurtured from an early age in schools and classrooms (Kohn, 1993). As choices enable students to become responsible toward their own learning and feel that the teacher respects their needs (Bluestein, 2008), I hope to involve students as much as I can when planning the lesson content and procedure. My goal is to send a message to students that all of them are valued, as equal, and indispensable contributors in the classroom and nurture successful learners who can learn and act on their own accord to bring about positive social changes.

In terms of concrete strategies to involve students, Alber (2014) suggests having students brainstorm and come up with topics that they want to take up in class, and having groups explore, research, and present

their findings of the topic are ways to give students more voice and choice. Another teacher involves students in designing the curriculum by asking: “What’s the most exciting way we could study this?” and students seem to feel motivated when the teacher uses their ideas (Kohn, 1993). As for my own suggestions to involve students in making pedagogical choices, I hope to provide several differentiated learning materials and assignments that suit the individual’s needs and interests. For example, if I were to teach high schools students, after students take up a textbook chapter about Nelson Mandela, they can choose to read a newspaper article, watch a YouTube video, or go to a seminar related to the topic, developing their findings, experiences, thoughts, and ideas in an essay. Another suggestion is to have the students research and present to the class any social, cultural, or world issue that they are concerned about, deciding a class project they could work on together to resolve the issue. However, one of the constraints that will most likely come up to actualize these innovative student-centered classes is the pressure from parents, as there may be concerns that students are not given enough time to prepare for their entrance examinations. Therefore, one of the aims for Japanese schools may be to prove that student-centered classrooms are cognitively and emotionally effective for students and could also prepare them for their future, and schools should thus focus more on critical thinking skills in examinations as well. Most importantly, instead of teachers having all the authority in classrooms, ‘an anti-bias approach’ that puts emphasis on critical student engagement, where “teachers become learners, and learners become teachers” through mutual dialogue (Critical Practices, 2014, p.3) is the kind of classroom environment that I hope to establish to bring about social transformation.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I feel it essential to clarify matters by taking a step back and trying to see not only the whole picture but also obscure matters constructed by society. I hope to incorporate knowledge from both traditional applied linguistics and critical applied linguistics in my future research and teaching, being aware that the world is full of taken-

for-granted ideologies constructed by a certain group of people. In particular, I aim at carefully analyzing diverse factors that influence students learning as well as engaging students in making pedagogical choices. As I tend to simply take what people say or write at face value, I would like to continuously nurture my own critical thinking skills to wisely perceive the world around me. My goal is to establish an inclusive learning environment where both teachers and students become autonomous learners and activists to realize positive social transformation.

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