Reflection to the Development of Criticality: An Empirical Study of Beginners' Japanese Language Courses at a British University

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This article investigates the role of reflection in the development of criticality through action research conducted in beginners' Japanese language courses at a British university. "Focused lessons" with activities which target critical thinking stimulation were inserted in the existing grammar-based language course framework. The analysis revealed the effect of conscious teaching design guiding students to reflection leading to the development of criticality. Students also demonstrated the ability to critically examine stereotypes and general beliefs instead of simply accepting them without being guided. So it is assumed that foreign language education itself, even if it is at the beginners' stage, has the potential to lead to reflection which can contribute to the development of criticality and it can be promoted further by conscious teaching design. If the aims of the language education take the development of criticality into consideration, reflection as an approach can be worth investigating.

The Fundamental Concept of Criticality and Reflection

The concept of criticality is discussed in various academic areas. Among them, critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 1972; Giroux, 1983) and critical thinking (e.g., McPeck, 1981; Siegel, 1988) are well-known theories in education. The distinct difference between the two is the ultimate goals: Critical pedagogy is education to foster critical citizens who can actively engage in transformative action for democratic societies, while critical thinking aims to foster critical thinking skills for persuasion and justification of one's claim and it does not extend beyond the school or university. However, what critical pedagogy and critical thinking share is the fundamental nature of being critical, that is, to encourage skepticism towards commonly accepted truisms (Burbles & Berk, 1999). Skepticism can be replaced by other expressions such as "suspended judgment" (Dewey, 1933, p.103).

The Criticality Project at the University of Southampton conducted empirical research on modern languages degree courses in a British university (Brumfit, Myles, Mitchell, Johnston, & Ford, 2005). According to Brumfit and his colleagues, criticality includes "a willingness to question" (p. 149). They also concluded that the content element of intermediate-advanced level language studies and academic content subjects have a significant contribution to make to the development of criticality. However, the possibility in beginners' language studies was left unknown. Traditionally, language is seen merely as an instrument necessary for study and not a part of the academic studies in higher education (Lodge, 2000). This view is particularly evident in the beginners' stage. Inspired by the question of whether beginners' language studies have value as an instrument only, as pointed out by Lodge (2000), an empirical study in beginners' Japanese language courses in a British university was conducted. It concluded that the development of criticality through foreign language education is possible even at the

beginners' stage and "inquiry" is the most essential first step of engaging in being critical (Yamada, 2009).[1] A more detailed explanation of the study is given in a later section of this article. The study also revealed that "reflection" emerged in some cases and it was assumed to be related to inquiry and "skepticism." This article analyzed the data of the empirical study again with a particular focus on how reflection is related to the initiation of inquiry. It was expected that this article can indicate some key points for the approach of promoting criticality development in beginners' language studies.

Dewey (1933) identified the connection between theory and practice, and reflection. He argued that the connection between the three elements of learning provides the basis of learning from and through experience. People cannot automatically learn through experience only. Because it is not the experience itself which makes people learn but it is the reflection upon the experience which plays an important role to make them learn and to formulate new knowledge. Dewey's influence is seen in many academic areas of education, such as experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972). The impact of Dewey is found in Freire (1985) as "the act of knowing involves a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action" (p. 50). Therefore, based on these theories, reflection plays an important role in the development of criticality and it is worth investigating this dimension of beginners' second-language learning based on empirical research. The research question set for this study is, "How is reflection connected to the initiation of inquiry?"

Method

Action Research Design

Action research was conducted in beginners' Japanese language courses in a British university where the author was teaching. Action research is often placed in contrast to more traditional modes of research, as it aims to generate new theory or knowledge in relation to practice (action), while traditional methods test previously established theories and develop and modify them in the light of new data. Furthermore, theory and knowledge generated by action research is highly valued by practitioners, unlike the products of traditional research which are often considered as abstract and not meaningful because of a lack of relationship with practice (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron & Reason, 2001; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Wadsworth, 1998). Therefore, participation is an important concept of action research, rather than locating the researcher outside the research field to observe "the researched" inside. The author thus played two roles: that of teacher and that of researcher.

The empirical study was conducted prior to the examination of existing definitions of theories such as critical pedagogy and critical thinking, because the empirical study aimed to purely illustrate the possibility of criticality grounded on the empirical data first without any influence of existing criticality concepts. It was conducted by the author in two stages of lower and upper beginner-level courses in four-year Japanese combined language degree programs at a British university, where she was teaching. In order to obtain a modern

languages degree, students had to take language, content modules such as linguistics, history, literature, and sociology, and compulsory year abroad modules in the third year of the four-year degree program.[2] The course syllabus was based on textbooks, which emphasize grammatical structures and integrated the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) with communicative activities. The purpose of this research was to test the feasibility of introducing new aims and the development of criticality into the teaching by developing new approaches and techniques of promoting criticality development. This meant that lessons with activities targeting criticality development were inserted into the existing language course framework, which followed a progression through grammar, while using techniques of communicative language teaching rather than those of grammar-translation. These new lessons were named *focused lessons* which are designed for the practice of grammatical structures but with activities highlighting cultural and linguistic dimensions such as customs, the origins of the greeting phrases, and poetry. With this new focus, focused lessons contrasted with the ordinary grammar-based lessons. In addition, observations of beginners' level language lessons in other universities ensured that the aims and syllabus of the ordinary lessons of the target courses met the same standards.

Participants

Forty-nine students took part in the study. Approximately 50% were British students and the rest were international students (from countries such as Mainland China, Singapore, and South Korea) and exchange students from European countries. Ethical procedures[3] were completed prior to the data collection. The author included all the students in the beginners' courses but only those who had given consent with their signature to agree to participate in this research at the beginning of the course.

Data Collection

Various qualitative data (teacher's diary record, researcher's field notes, and audio recordings of the lessons) were collected over one academic year. Data were also collected from students (group interviews and post-lesson questionnaires) and these became the main sources for analysis. The group interviews were conducted at the end of the teaching weeks of the academic year. Six groups ranging from two to five participants were formed, and the duration of interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were semi-structured, although the topics and issues to be covered were specified in advance, the sequence and wording of questions were decided by the interviewer in the course of the interview, following the direction taken spontaneously by the participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). So fixed probes and question patterns were not used but the interviewer (author) directed the conversation intentionally towards the issues of language (grammatical structure and scripts), culture, and what students particularly gained from the lessons, if these topics did not naturally appear in discussion. An advantage of the group interview in this research was to reduce the teacher's power over the students in the interview unlike in a one-to-one setting. The situation also created an atmosphere similar

to that in the classroom though less formal. The written post-lesson questionnaire was conducted after each of the 13 focused lessons and an additional 13 randomly selected ordinary lessons. On each occasion, five volunteer participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire. A total of 130 questionnaires were collected. The same standard questionnaire form was used throughout 26 lessons. The questions (see Appendix A) are open-ended to gain participants' spontaneous and expressive response (Oppenheim, 1992).

The validity and reliability of the qualitative data were taken into consideration by ensuring two requirements were met: a natural setting was ensured by planning the research to fit into the existing teaching framework (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and triangulation by arranging multiple sources and methods of data collection (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data were analyzed using a qualitative data analysis method (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview transcripts were examined as closely as possible to describe the "reality" and the theories students held about reality, following the definition of grounded theory, which is best explained as "theory . . . derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 12). The patterns which were most noticeable in the data were focused on first as "the first categories to emerge from the data generally are those that occur most frequently" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 242).

Fifty-three cases were validated from the data. Each case contains an assertion with reasons which students try to justify and explain their opinions. Some of the assertions may seem shallow and without maturity at first. But they did not seem to represent an absolute terminal point of students' thinking process, as their initial assertions could be challenged later by encounters with different points of view or opinions. The most important is the students' step in the process of thinking by themselves.

Group interview data did not shed light on the initiation of these cases. However, some elements of post-lesson questionnaire answers indicated that the students were in the process of inquiring, which was evident in expressions such as "I wonder . . ." and "why." They had noticed something and started to wonder about it. The two pieces of data presented below are answers to the open-ended question, "Please tell me about your thoughts on Japan during the lesson (see Appendix A)", which appeared in the post-lesson questionnaire. The first piece of data relates to a lesson about grammatical structure describing direction and location, in which the Japanese structure differed considerably from English. The second one shows another student beginning to wonder about the language itself.

Student 1 (S-1): I wondered why Japanese language developed in this way, if that was for any particular cultural reason. (Post-lesson Questionnaire Answer 1)

S-2: Wondered why some modern words use katakana rather than hiragana and why they need to distinguish. (Post-lesson Questionnaire Answer 2)

When the students are in the middle of the *inquiry stage*, they are not conscious of it. This is a possible reason for why the inquiry stage emerged with not being obviously related

to either assertion or reason in the group interview data. But when students first encounter new phenomena and ideas, and stop for inquiry, the process of "being critical" has already started. Even if they decide to agree with the ideas in the end, it is a different action from simply accepting the presented ideas without thinking. Each validated case is the product of question-raising in response to new knowledge, and the consequent search for answers by reasoning. Therefore, it is assumed that any case has the inquiry stage as a starting point, even if it is not visible in the group interview data, and it is a crucial point in the student theory-building process.

Therefore, the empirical study concluded that the development of criticality through foreign language education is possible even at the beginners' stage and inquiry is the most essential first step of engaging in being critical (Yamada, 2009).[1]

Case Studies

This study shifts on reflection which emerged in some cases. Focusing on the relationship between reflection and inquiry, this study selected two cases from the empirical data as shown in later sections. They are the cases which illustrate the relationship between the two but are not presented as samples to represent the experiment. The literature on case studies discusses the interpretation of generalization. Although researchers do not totally refuse the existence of generalization in case studies, they make clear distinctions between generalization in case studies and scientific and statistical generalization (Bassey, 1999; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000; Yin, 2003). The generalization in case studies is defined as analytic generalization to expand and generalize theories and not to enumerate frequencies (Yin, 2003). The second nature of case studies is that they are context-bound and largely overlap with the core concept of qualitative data which is described as richness and holism, with strong potential for revealing complexity providing "thick descriptions" that are vivid and nested in a real context (Miles & Hubermann, 1994, p.10,). The goal is not to produce a standardized set of results, but rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of, and perspective on, a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). It also overlaps with the concept of grounded theory as the new theory was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The third nature of case studies is that they are suited to research questions with "how" and "why" rather than the ones with "what" (Yin, 2003). It is important to investigate the cases deeply and to extract what is illustrated there. Tightly structured design is not suitable and it has also something in common with the nature of qualitative research. Flick (2007) suggests loose designs in qualitative research when the theoretical constructs and concepts are not very developed.

Therefore based on the above theory of case studies, the two cases below are presented. The analysis focuses on how the initiation of inquiry is related to reflection and how the process can be directed.

Results and Analysis

Case 1: Reflections on Cultural Dimension

The data below indicate that the students do initially possess certain stereotypical images of Japan and Japanese people in their minds and these existing images are sometimes linked to the elements of their Japanese language learning.

The fact that they had to go through the mastery of three different kinds of Japanese scripts including Chinese characters, and had to work hard to master them at the beginning, led to their imagination of how hard the students in Japan work and then their hypothesis of Japanese people as intelligent was developed. So their own study experience is immediately connected to the image of Japanese as intelligent people quoting the literacy rate and economy. The following examples illustrate this observation:

S-3: I have more respect to the people because they have three different ways of writing systems making [   ][4]

S-4: intelligent people—high literacy rate—in Japan 99.5% of all people can read and write Japanese

S-5: intelligent—the economy is well

S-6: I understand the amount of work that Japanese students go through
(Interview Data 1)

The following three answers from post-lesson questionnaires appeared in relation to the ordinary grammar lesson of *keigo* (honorific and humble language). Interestingly, having learnt keigo and polite expressions, students instantly linked their learning of polite expressions to an existing image of the Japanese people as polite. The following answers respond to the question: "Please tell me about your thought on Japan during the lesson."

S-7: Japanese people are very, very polite.
(Post-lesson Questionnaire Answer 3)

S-8: Japan is a place where being polite is very important.
(Post-lesson Questionnaire Answer 4)

S-9: They have a very detailed concept of level (importance, position, etc.). The Japanese language reflects the attitude of the people.
(Post-lesson Questionnaire Answer 5)

All the above data show a kind of starting point, which includes biased views and stereotypes. The following data shows students changed their attitude from that point. As seen

in the above, learning Japanese presents the risk of enforcing biased images of Japan and Japanese people, which is not expected as a result of learning Japanese language. However, the following case is related to a focused lesson which made an occasion for the students to interrogate these existing general preconceptions in their minds. The lesson was designed as a focused lesson with a cultural dimension and dealt with the stereotypical images of England and Japan, especially how Japanese people perceive English people (see Appendix B). The topic of the focused lesson was how to spend free time. The teacher (author) asked the students to mention any free time activities typical of Japanese people and British people, respectively. For Japanese people, the students reported such activities as karaoke and reading manga (cartoon); For British people, they mentioned activities such as drinking beer, going to clubs, shopping, having tea, and playing football. Then, the teacher also asked the students to guess what Japanese people think British people like to do in their free time. They listed activities such as "afternoon tea," "gardening," and "walking the hills." These answers coincided with the images that Japanese people have about British people according to the survey on the website used as learning material in the lesson. In a sense, students know well how British people are perceived by other people. At this point, students started to question both stereotypes, and they demonstrated the ability to critically examine such stereotypes instead of simply accepting them. Evidence of criticality is found in the following answers to the question, "Please tell me about your thoughts on Japan during the lesson."

S-10: Stereotypical images of Japanese people—they are not always true.
(Post-lesson Questionnaire Answer 6)

However, in fact, there is no remarkable difference in how to spend leisure time between Japanese and British people against the images and the conventional ones like meeting with people and eating out were the common results, according to the survey (see Appendix B).

The following interview data is a discussion related to this focused lesson. The student's previous experience of travel to Spain is connected to the reflection and contributes critically to the examination of the trustworthiness of the stereotypical images of each country and general beliefs. This shows that students do not remain trapped by the stereotypical images. The various stereotypical images of their own country taken from the survey on the website became the reference for the critical examination and led them into an inquiry.

S-11: the thing is, we don't really drink proper English teas—stuffs like Earl Grey—and we don't even drink that kind of thing—

S-12: —do you really think that we do stop at five o'clock and drink tea [don't you]?

S-13: —we used to think Spain in the same way—you think that everybody stops at 'siesta'—at two o'clock everybody goes to 'siesta' and all the shops shut—bars shut and you can't get anything—and I believed that for the longest as I was a kid that 'siesta' happened and everything stops in Spain—it's obviously not true—it's just a generalization.

  (Interview Data 2)

Case 2: Reflections on Learning Process Dimension

    The indication of criticality development is seen not only in the cultural dimension of Japanese language learning, but it can also be observed in the actual learning process. In the previous case, the interrogation was raised by the class activity, but in this Case 2, most importantly the students themselves raised a question and tested it by their own actions.

    S-14: well, before I started studying it, definitely that was going to be extremely different from English, because I've done French before and I've done Italian before—and I mean they are both essentially same structure as English and use same alphabet as well, so—but once I started with Japanese—I think once we'd learned like 'hiragana'—and once that was assumed normal—it wasn't much more difficult any more than learning French or Italian, it was just like another language and once you get past it—the symbols
(Interview Data 3)

    In the above data, the difficulty of the Japanese language is compared with European languages, especially in relation to the research participant's own experience of learning. The student constructed a hypothesis based on his learning experience: although learning the Japanese writing system requires more effort than European languages, learning the Japanese language is not especially difficult, as far as other elements of the learning are concerned. In both cases, we see that a comparative method foregrounds characteristics of the Japanese language and leads to the formulation of a theory.
    One form of critical examination of general beliefs is seen in another similar data provided below. The perception of Japanese as a difficult language in the UK, where the major European languages such as French and German are dominant foreign languages, is obviously created by the people who have never studied Japanese. And the students also used to share this view before the start of learning Japanese. However, having experienced the learning of Japanese language, the students found that the existing common image of Japanese as a difficult language is not entirely correct.

    S-15: <u>I thought it's much harder than this</u>
    S-16: yes, me too
    S-17: yeah
    S-15: because you get a lot people who say it is and so they kind of create that image that it's a very difficult language to learn—and then you actually realize <u>it's not that difficult</u> [   ] today
(Interview Data 4)

    S-18: I think there is a perception that as soon as you tell [   ] you are studying Japanese—they just think that it's an impossible thing to do—but I think <u>we are</u>

<u>learning that it's not that hard</u> and I think that speaking and listening parts are a lot easier than reading and writing.
(Interview Data 5)

Discussion

The role of reflection leading to inquiry and skepticism is evident in the cases of the empirical data presented. Criticality in language education is often discussed in relation to its cultural dimension such as *critical cultural awareness* which is the central notion of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) developed by Byram (1997). Byram defines critical cultural awareness as "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (p. 63). He explains the notion further as "relativisation of one's own and valuing of other's meanings, beliefs, and behaviours does not happen without a reflective and analytical challenge to the ways in which they have been formed and the complex of social forces within which they are experienced" (p. 35). As in the first case, the general belief about Japan and Japanese people was even enforced by the learning of Japanese language unexpectedly; however, an occasion to be engaged in reflection guided the students back to the principle without biases. Reflection is an act of "decentering from one's own taken-for granted world" (Byram & Fleming, 1998, p. 7). In other words, "detachment and separation" from his/her own usual standpoint, as Freire (1973) emphasizes below, is the necessary process for reflection and it is also an act to know our own language, culture, society, and selves:

> Human beings are active beings, capable of reflection on themselves and on the activity in which they are engaged. They are able to detach themselves from the world in order to find their place in it and with it. Only people are capable of this act of "separation" in order to find their place in the world and enter in a critical way into their own reality. "To enter into" reality means to look at it objectively, and apprehend it as one's field of action and reflection. (p. 105)

This study implies that in the beginners' language study, reflection is not limited to the cultural dimension only. Whether on the cultural dimension or other aspects of language learning, the development of criticality can be a product of foreign language learning, besides linguistic skills. If the aim of language education is to take it into consideration, reflection as an approach to the development of criticality, then it is worth investigating.

Notes

1. The empirical data were initially collected for a larger scale study to discuss the concept of criticality. The data were re-examined and selected specifically to consider more precisely the implication of reflection in the development of criticality.
2. The year abroad program requires students to spend a year (or half a year) in a country where their language is spoken.

3. The students were given a letter with the researcher's signature which explained the purpose and the nature of the research, how long and how often data collection would take place, what kind of works and cooperation the researcher would ask of the participants, and stated that the data would only be used for this research, treated as confidential, and be destroyed after the thesis is completed. Also it was promised that it would have no influence on the assessments of the module and students would have the right to withdraw from this research at any time without giving a reason.

4. Period, comma, and the capital at the beginning of the sentence were not used in the transcript because they are not always suitable for spoken discourse. Omissions are expressed by: (...); special terms and Japanese words by: '   '; and inaudible syllables words by: [   ].

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Appendix A: Post-lesson Questionnaire

Q1: What do you think you have learnt especially from today's lesson?

Q2: Have you gained any view which you have not had before? Or is there any new discovery?

Q3: Please tell me about your thought on Japan during the lesson.

Q4: Did today's lesson make you think about your own country? How?

Q5: In today's lesson, have you had any point which you had difficulty with? If yes, what were they?

Q6: Please tell me your general thought about today's lesson.

Q7: What do you think of my comment on today's lesson?

Appendix B: Focused Lesson Plan

Lesson Title: Leisure Time
<u>*Main Activities*</u> ● To guess the results of the following survey* on free time. To form sentences in Japanese as practice. After that, the survey result is shown. (a) What Japanese people like to do, (b) What British people like to do, (c) What Japanese people think that British people like to do.
<u>*Can do (language competence)*</u> ● To use 'Himanatoki, ~noga sukidesu' form (When I have free time, I like to do~.) <u>*Know (knowledge of language and culture)*</u> ● To go over the images of English people for Japanese people and vice versa. <u>*Why (thinking): intercultural and linguistic dimensions*</u> ● To think about stereotypical images developed on both sides (England and Japan).

The survey result was taken from a Japanese website, accessed March 9, 2006 (http://www.eikokutabi.com/). (a) to eat out / to drive / to travel / to do karaoke / to watch video; (b) to meet friends / to watch TV and video / to listen to music / to go to cinema / to take a walk; (c) to go mountain hiking / to do gardening / to have afternoon tea / to do DIY / to take a walk.