Conscientization and the Discursive Construction of Identity Across cultures: Using Literacy Autobiography as a Reflective and Analytical Tool

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an ongoing study that utilizes the literacy autobiographies of 10 Asian and 10 Western graduate students from TESOL Masters programs in Korea and America as data for a cross cultural study on the discursive process of identity formation and the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). While the data suggests similarities and differences between cultures in terms of the effects of education, social relationships, media, and religion, no definitive claims may be made due to the small size of the research corpus. However, analysis of the data revealed that only four of the narratives could be judged as engaging in critical introspection of individual subjects systems of knowledge, values, and beliefs, as opposed to the other narratives that were primarily descriptive of individual personal experiences. As such, this study found that while the willingness and ability to engage in the critical practices which lead to the development of a critical consciousness are similar across cultures, they may be mediated by the literacy practices inscribed in education, media, and other social practices.

Key Words
Cross Cultural Studies, Critical pedagogy, Identity.

Introduction

This paper is a preliminary report on a larger ongoing study using the literacy autobiographies of 57 TESOL Masters students, that were the terminal assignments in TESOL MA courses in Korean and America, as data in a cross-cultural investigation of student and teacher identity, the effectiveness of critical approaches to applied linguistics, and the process of conscientization, or gaining a critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). According to Freire, critical consciousness is an orientation towards education that rejects a received view of knowledge and focuses dialogic inquiry into how knowledge and representation functions across social contexts in ways that fosters the social agency of learners. In this way, literacy becomes the ability to read the word (content knowledge) and the world (knowledge situated within diverse social contexts) in ways that that define the process of conscientization. A literacy autobiography is a form of critical autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2003) designed to have subjects reflect on their lives in order to reveal and question the origins and outcomes of their knowledge, beliefs, and values. In other worlds, a literacy autobiography is a tool to unveil the discursive process of the construction of individual and social identities. The term literacy is used in conjunction to autobiography in a more inclusive sense where literacy is defined not only in terms of the ability to read and write, but also as a function of all pedagogical processes that convey meanings which shape how we see ourselves and understand our world (Street, 1995; Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 1998). According to Giroux (1997), pedagogy is a term that is inclusive of all the various ways people are exposed to and internalize information, including formal education, social interactions, media, and other forms of representation. In addition, Giroux acknowledges that pedagogy is inherently political. As such, literacy becomes the means by which our identities, subjectivities, and world views are constructed. As progressive conceptions of teacher education stress

the need for reflective practice and reflexivity in teaching and research (Kincheloe, 2004), critical reflection into one's system of knowledge, beliefs, and values is crucial to anyone who wishes to be a practicing educator. Perhaps Socrates (2003) said it best when he stated "…an unexamined life is a life not worth living" (p. 107). In this way, a literacy autobiography becomes not only a tool for unraveling hidden and erroneous beliefs that inform one's practice, but also serves to inform, challenge, and enhance the overall life of the author.

In recent years, the growth of critical and post-structural/postmodern literature in applied linguistics has been considerable. While many of these scholars do not directly use the term critical pedagogy in their works (Norton, 2000; Kubota, 2001), it is clear that they are drawing from a wide base of literature from the fields of education (Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2004), sociology (Foucault, 1984; Bourdieu, 1991), cultural studies (Hall, 1997; Giroux, 2005), and psychology (Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1994) that share many common theoretical and epistemological conceptions of critical pedagogy such as the social construction of knowledge, the necessity of situating knowledge within multiple social contexts and relations of power, and the necessity of dialogism in the process of interrogating and internalizing knowledge. In the same way, while the terms "critical consciousness" and "conscientization" are not commonly referenced in such literature, such understandings may be assumed as Friere's (2000) work is foundational to critical pedagogy, and hence to critical approaches to applied linguistics.

Applications of critical approaches in applied linguistics to cross-cultural studies have tended to focus on the effects of globalization (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 2008; Sung, 2007) or post-colonialism (Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999) on English language learning. While much of the mainstream work on globalization in applied linguistics is discussed in terms of intelligibility and target language (Kachru, 1992; Crystal, 1997), critical approaches focus more on the socio-cultural and political aspects

of the relationship between globalization, post-colonialism, and ELT. In general, these approaches tend to either explicate how ELT is a core aspect globalization as a western, or American, dominated hegemonic system that controls education and language (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994), thereby becoming a form of *linguistic* imperialism (Philipson, 2008), or focus on how culture and language are being mediated on a local level, or *glocalized* (Sung, 2007), in ways that form hybrid forms of language and culture. These latter approaches are more hopeful than the former in that while they acknowledge the negative phenomena related to globalization and ELT, they illustrate that the subjectivities constructed through English language learning in the era of globalization are not fixed. Central to this notion of glocal-hybrid forms of language and culture is the concept of appropriation (Canagarajah, 1999, Norton, 2000), where different forms of language and culture are acquired through a process of critically situating these forms of knowledge in ways suitable to individual, local, and global social contexts. In these terms, the intersection of the global and the local becomes a site for the negotiation of language, culture, and power and a window into a variety of cross-cultural processes such as communication, identity formation, and politics (Norton, 2000; Sung, 2007). However, what is absent in this literature is how what might be called a "critical" perspective, implicit within the concept of appropriation, translates across cultures. This absence gives rise to questions that should be of importance to critical educators, such as: 1) Are there differences in how students from different cultures approach and understand critical and post-structural/postmodern literature? And, 2) Are some cultures more open to critical examination than others? The purpose of this study is to utilize literacy autobiographies to examine these questions as well as to examine the similarities and differences between the individual systems of knowledge, values, and beliefs of Asian and western Masters students.

Research Design

As a preliminary report on a larger, ongoing study, this qualitative study uses 20 randomly selected literacy autobiographies as its research corpus. Literacy autobiographies were the terminal assignment in various TESOL Masters courses that focused on critical and post-structural/ postmodern approaches to applied linguistics, such as *Introduction to Critical English Language Teaching, Postmodernism in ELT,* and *Critical Literacy in EFL*, that were taught in one Korean and two American universities. The rationale for the initial study was twofold: First, as part of a more inclusive pedagogical course plan, students were invited to investigate their own intellectual makeup by critically reflecting on the origins of their systems of knowledge, values, and beliefs for the purposes of better understanding the nature, purposes, and outcomes of teaching and learning, and, Second, to provide data for a long term study that might serve to illuminate how students are responding to their exposure to critical and post-structural/post-modern literature in applied linguistics. The purpose of this preliminary report is to investigate how culture may serve to mediate understandings of critical and post-structural/post-modern literature in applied linguistics, to determine if recognizable understandings of the concepts presented in this literature are culturally bound, or interculturally fluid, and to determine the effectiveness of the MA courses listed above by examining the depth to which students deconstruct their systems of knowledge, beliefs, and values. As such, this qualitative study falls under a symbolic research paradigm as it seeks to better understand the conventions of meaning within a social system (Kuhn, 1970; Popkewitz, 1984; Habermas, 1988).

There are many forms of narrative research in the social sciences including autoethnography (Hayano, 1979; Pratt, 1994), critical autobiography (Church, 1995), narrative ethnography (Abu-Lughod, 1993), reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996a), and many others to numerous

to name here. While there are many designations of narrative research, they may be best understood to come under the general heading of autoethnorgraphy (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). All of these various forms of narrative research share a reflective, reflexive, and introspective practice of research that utilizes personal narratives as a dialectical means of making connections between individual subjectivity, institutions, social structures, and social practices. As such, these various forms of narrative research have become blurred genres that cut across disciplines and definitions, and may fall under symbolic or critical research paradigms, depending on their focus (Popkewitz, 1984). These narrative forms of research allow the researcher to interpret the data produced by subjects while giving subjects the social agency of "voice" by providing a forum for their life experiences, which in turn allows readers to form their own interpretations (Church, 1995). Literacy autobiography fits into this blurred genre as it uses narrative writing as a means for subjects to critically reflect on the how their systems of knowledge, beliefs, and values were constructed through their interactions with the social world. According to Ellis & Bochner (2003), autoethnographic researchers look outward to the socio-cultural aspects of their lives and then look inward at personal experience in ways that

> …expose a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations… In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language (p.209).

In these ways, literacy autobiography enables subjects to explore their discursive selves and make meaning of their lives without being restricted by the formalities of the more common rhetorical genres of academic

prose. In addition, literacy autobiographies give subjects greater social agency in the research process as it gives authentic "voice" to the life stories that they tell (Lather, 1991). For these reasons, literacy autobiography was selected as a useful means of gathering a wide array of data that might reveal how students were internalizing the literature offered in their courses in terms of the connections they were making to their lives and their practices as teachers.

Participants

This study is a qualitative study consisting of terminal course papers gathered over a period of seven years, seven different courses, and 56 individual student papers of students from various cultures. This preliminary report focuses on the cross-cultural issues revealed by the analysis of 20 randomly selected literacy autobiographies including 10 from students of Asian countries (including 3 Chinese and 7 Korean) and 10 from may be termed "western" countries (5 American, 2 Canadian, 2 Australian, and 1 South African). As the purpose of this study was to investigate how different socio-cultural groups responded to critical and post-tructural/postmodern literature, participants were instructed to include the following biographical data on their final narratives: age, gender, ethnicity, and social class. Individual papers were ascribed pseudonyms to protect the authors' anonymity (See figure 1). The author is aware that the bifurcation of the research corpus into "Asian" and "western" designations is problematic as such designations essentialize multiple cultures into inclusive categories, thereby ignoring the real differences between these various cultures. However, this bifurcation is done for both strategic and practical reasons. The strategic reasons for this bifurcation are twofold: First, literature in applied linguistics often draws an East/West dichotomy when analyzing issues of how ELT is bound within larger

hegemonic systems of western domination such as linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 2008), the relationship between globalization and ELT (Canagarajah, 2002; Wallace, 2002), and the representations of U.S. education in Asia (Kubota, 2001). Second, as the makeup of the Masters classes were generally comprised of western, Korean, and Chinese students, the students themselves often used these designations. Third, to shed light on whether these designations have any validity in terms of the meanings students constructed through exposure to critical and post-structural/post-modern literatures. And, Fourth, to draw attention to this often used, and essentialized dichotomy in order illustrate that cultures do not fall into such clear cut categories. The practical reason for this bifurcation is that the each class had a diversity of students from both of these designations and that the students commonly raised such designations in classroom discussions. Therefore, as these designations exist within the subjectivities of the students and within applied linguistics literature, to examine how these dichotomies might be expressed in students' self examinations, and to better understand these issues across cultures, the course papers used as data in this study were selected according to these designations.

Figure 1: Subjects

1. Mi-sook: Korean female, age 31, middle class.
2. Sang-ho: Korean male, age 29, middle class.
3. Ho-jun: Korean male, age 32, lower middle class.
4. Na-young: Korean Female, age 33, middle class.
5. Sang-hee: Korean female, age 29, lower middle class.
6. Chung-ae: Korean female, age 35, lower middle class.
7. Eun-mi: Korean female, age 29, middle class.
8. Ling: Chinese female, age 28, middle class.
9. Ying: Chinese female, age 32, lower middle class.
10. Tao: Chinese male, age 34, lower middle class.
11. Ben: American male, age 27, middle class.

12. Terry: American male, age 30, lower middle class.
13. Lisa: American female, age 28, middle class.
14. Rachel: American female, age 31, upper middle class.
15. John: American male, age 33, middle class.
16. Nathan, Canadian male, age 34, middle class.
17. Robert. Canadian male, age 36, middle class.
18. Dennis, Australian male, age 42, middle class.
19. David, Australian male, age 35, middle class.
20. Evan, South African Male, age 31, upper middle class.

Research Context

The data for this study consists of the terminal papers, literacy autobiographies, gathered in 7 Masters level TESOL courses over a period of 5 years with 5 courses held in a Korean University and 2 courses held in an American university. Although the data was collected in three separate courses (*Introduction to Critical English Language Teaching, Postmodernism in ELT,* and *Critical Literacy in EFL*) and the focus of the courses and required readings differed between courses, all of the courses included in this study drew on a similar base of critical and post-structural/post-modern literature both in, and extant, to applied linguistics. In addition, the students in all of these courses were a mixture of Asian and western students. In general, these courses focused on theories and pedagogies derived from critical pedagogy (Pennycook, 1994; Giroux, 1997; Canagarajah, 1999; Freire, 2000; Kincheloe, 2004), post-structural (Foucault, 1984; Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2000; Kubota, 2001), and postmodern (McLaren, 1995; Giroux, 2005) approaches to education and applied linguistics in ways designed to enable students to begin the process of conscientization (Freire, 2000). The course readings were presented in a discussion based seminar course format where students were expected to compose a two page response to the readings that would serve as

a focus for class discussions. The course also included instructor lectures on key theoretical and pedagogical concepts such as post-structural definitions of discourse, situated learning, theories of representation, conceptions of literacy, deconstructionism, social reproduction, media literacy, and the nature of globalization and ELT. Students were encouraged to both situate the readings within their own experiences and teaching practices and to use the theoretical concepts presented to deconstruct ELT in terms of educational systems and practice and the social and political issues embedded within ELT. The terminal assignment of a literacy autobiography was assigned at the beginning of the course and was regularly referred to in connection to course readings and course instruction. Therefore, students received a wide grounding in, and practice with, the literature that would serve as the tools to write their final papers. It needs to be stated that each course was split in terms of how students felt about the final paper. In each course there was a fairly even divide between students who seemed daunted by the task, or were unwilling to take on the work of critical introspection, and others who seemed to relish both the intellectual task and the freedom of writing in a narrative genre.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures used in this study followed coding procedures commonly found in various methodologies in qualitative research. Specifically, the data (course papers) were repeatedly and systematically read, or sampled, through comparisons to determine relationships and contradictions in the data and theoretical sampling to connect the data to working theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The emerging patterns within the data then served as major codes within the results of the study and as a means of analysis in connection to theory (Creswell, 2008). While this approach is akin to basic notions of grounded theory

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is commonly held to be a neutral, or "blank slate" approach to research, it may also be utilized in critical forms of research when it is also acknowledged to be informed by the researcher's disciplinary and professional knowledge and orientation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, the data was coded not only to recognize and document patterns emerging from the data, but to view them through the critical, post-structural/postmodern analytical lens that served as both the impetus for this study and the generation of data by the subjects. The majority of the student papers (17 papers) used as data in this study were organized in one of two ways: chronologically (10 papers) or thematically (7 papers). The chronologically organized narratives tended to be organized around age and education level, whereas the thematic narratives were generally organized around the themes of education, family and other social interactions, media, and religion. The three papers that did not follow these two rhetorical patterns were organized around important events in each subject's life. Although there were differences in the narrative structure of subjects' papers, they nevertheless all addressed the themes listed above.

Results & Discussion

Analysis of the data gleaned through the process of coding the research corpus revealed the four major codes of education, social interactions, media, and religion, with each major code having sub-codes relevant to the major code group. Under the code of education, the sub-codes of dissatisfaction with education, social class, and gender emerged from the data. Under the code of social interactions, the sub-codes of home literacy and teacher ¯student relationships emerged from the data. No sub-codes emerged from the data regarding the codes of media and religion. In addition, the process of coding revealed a marked difference in the quality

of data in terms of the depth of analysis the subjects displayed in their narratives. Specifically, sixteen of the subjects represented in this study wrote narratives that were primarily descriptive in nature, as opposed to four narratives that engaged in more critical forms of analysis. The descriptive narratives primarily described events in subjects' lives, and the feelings associated with them, such as sadness, anger, or happiness, without making connections to how issues of culture, power, and ideology discursively constructed these events and the meanings they ascribed to them. The other four papers in the corpus clearly went beyond description in attempts to critically reflect on personal experiences by deconstructing them into relationships among culture, power, and ideology in ways that allowed the author to better understand the contexts of their lives and the meanings they had made from them. As such, these two different kinds of narratives were coded as "descriptive" and "critical" papers and will hereafter be referred to as such. Perhaps the major finding of this study is that only four of the participant papers exhibited much depth of a critical reflective analysis and a good understanding of the literature presented in their courses. These four papers are also strikingly different in that their experiential analyses are represented in a discursive manner, i.e., they make multiple connections between the experiences, and the meanings they make of them, and a variety of social, cultural, and political factors. It is also interesting that these four critical papers were diffused across gender and the various cultures represented in this study as the authors were a Korean male, a Chinese female, an American male, and a South African male. It needs to be stated that as it is not possible to present all of the relevant correlations in data across cultures within the scope of this paper, representative samples of the data from each of the previously designated categories are presented.

Education

All of the participants in this study reported negative feelings towards their educational experiences, particularly their experiences in public school education. While many of the participants reported more positive experiences in higher education, it was made clear that they found much dissatisfaction there as well. In terms of both the formative experiences of their lives and the meanings made of these experiences, all of the subjects primarily wrote about their experiences in public schools. Within the code of education, subjects reflected on other similar issues such as test-based curricula, lack of freedom of thought or action, education and social class, and education and gender. While none of these codes are surprising in themselves, particularly as all of these phenomena and the social inequalities they represent and engender are well known in the professional literature (Apple, Giroux, Kincheloe), it may be surprising to some that these phenomena are experienced across cultures, albeit in culturally specific ways. However, such similarities in educational experiences should not be surprising as much of the literature in education, specifically in critical pedagogy and critical literacy, reports that education and literacy has never been about empowering individuals or social groups, but about social reproduction and stratification (Bourdieu, 1991, Giroux, 1997; Shannon, 1998,). In these ways, the student narratives reported here support the conclusions of such literature.

Much of the dissatisfaction with public school education was framed in terms of testing, lack of discussion, and lack of connection to student lives. Ben complained that school was boring as it had little or nothing to do with his life in terms of his current or future interests. He summated his dislike for public education as follows:

> The curriculum was horrible, at best. I was constantly detached as the classes were not centered around discussion‥sometimes there would

> be a text book that I would like and actually read for the multiple choice test. There were exceptions, but I don't feel bad for the generalization (p.5).

Here, Ben clearly states that his dissatisfaction with education was a result of traditional, banking, forms of education devoid of any real social connection. Ben's response is representative of the data from the other western participants experience with public education. Similarly, Mi-sook relates a kind of public schooling that has little to do with the students as people and focuses entirely on the academic rank that is the result of testing.

> It has been a long time since the schools of Korea became more distant from the field of education that is based on humanity. They lay aside the education from the moral sense, and they just teach the students how to memorize what they have learned and how to get the knack of examinations. As a result of it, Korean Education was debased to the field of making grades from the first grade to the last (p.5).

Mi-sook's analysis of her own experiences with public school education in Korea as dehumanizing parallels Ben's feelings towards his own experiences as well as those of Ling, who wrote of the terrible pressure exerted by parents, teachers, fellow students, and society to make good grades on standardized tests. According to Ling, she and her fellow students

> …hated this kind of life, but few of us tried to question or challenge it except to complain to each other, and we even did not want to escape it because we did not want to disappoint our teachers and parents… making parents disappointed is not only a shame, but a guilt (p.10).

While Mi-sook's and Ling's experiences may evince greater social pressures laid upon students in terms of the outcomes of test-based curricula, they

mirror Ben's experiences and feelings in their dislike and distrust of test driven education. The data above illustrates how the data on education from western participants tended to be descriptive in nature while the data from the Asian participants exhibited attempts to situate their experiences in larger social contexts. However, the data presented here from Mi-sook and Ling only manage to vaguely address the possible discursive connections to their experiences, thereby failing to come to any meaningful understanding of how their education played a part in the construction of their knowledge, beliefs, and values, or the meanings they made form this process.

The differences in the quality and depth of analyses between the critical and descriptive narratives reveled themselves through various discursive connections to social class, media, politics and other social structures and practices. The following excerpt is commensurate with the analyses from the all of the critical narratives and exemplifies the differences between the two types of narrative responses through an analysis of the social causes and effects of test-based curricula. Ho-jun writes that tests were:

> …like an evil spirit to give the permanent and supreme strength and legitimacy to the textbook knowledges. At the same time, it was a dark judger to discriminate those who were in and those who were out in various ways. The result of the test, the grade, was not just indicators of who were doing well in school. It meant much more than that. It had psychological, social, and political implications inextricably connected with inequality, disparity, and power…Instead of empowering me to be politically and socially aware, textbooks immersed me into the illusionary identity of upper middle class driving me into the status of helplessness and passive naiveté (p. 6).

Here, Ho-jun clearly relates the power of social coercion that underlies test-based curricula through his negative connotation of the legitimacy such testing confers, while detailing the negative individual and social

effects of high stakes testing. Ho-jun's reflective analysis not only coincides with much of the professional literature on the various negative consequences and political implications of test-based curricula (Giroux, 1997; Apple, 2004; Kincheloe, 2004), but also reflects Foucault's (1984) theory of regimes of knowledge and truth that explicates how the power of social conditioning in education, academia, the media, and other social practices serves to legitimize specific forms of knowledge as truth.

The issue of education and social class was also widely reported in the data of both western and Asian participants. While this issue was important to both groups of participants, being reported by 6 western participants and 5 Asian participants, western participants' related greater feelings of anger and resentment to the workings of social class bias in education as opposed to the Asian participants who tended to describe their social class in a matter-of-fact manner coached in terms of having to try harder to achieve. Terry, an American male, related how his social class negatively affected his performance in school in terms of how he was viewed by his teachers and peers.

> For most of my time in school I didn't fit exactly with the rest of my class. One reason that I was different was that I was from the rougher and poorer part of town. Many students were cruel to me and the teachers seemed to look down on me (p. 8).

Terry's descriptions of his experiences mirror the experiences of the other western participant's data about social class and education as being marginalized in terms of social interactions with peers and teachers and the perception that their grades were connected to the stigmata of negative perceptions of lower social class. Alternatively, Sang-hee, a Korean female, and, Ying, a Chinese female described their experiences in the following way:

> My family did not have too much money, but they managed to have me go to a pretty good school, so I tried very hard to study to get a good result. I made my best effort to make them proud (Sang-hee, p.4).

> Like most families in our town, my parents had to work hard to send us to school. Some student's families had money, but I did not care about that, it just meant that I had to work harder to be success (Ying, p. 8).

On the surface it may seem that both Sang-hee and Ying do not care about, or recognize the importance of social class in education while Terry evinces anger about his situation. Their seeming acceptance of the dynamics of social class may be an expression of Confucian influences on education and society (Park & Cho, 1995; Seth, 2002: Shin & Crookes, 2005) and does not infer that Sang-hee and Ying are unaware of their circumstances, or that they are satisfied with them. Nonetheless, it is clear that students across cultures recognize that social class is a marker of inequality in education. However, apart from the four critical narratives, the data on social class and education remains primarily descriptive and shows little depth of analysis.

Discussions of education and social class in the critical narratives went beyond mere description of individual experiences to deconstructions of how social class affects education in terms of social relationships within the classroom and economic and social opportunities outside of the classroom. John's analysis of the relationship between education and social class is representative of the critical narratives in the connections he makes between social class, privilege, opportunity, and education.

> I think that I began to see things differently because my family moved around a lot. We were middle class, but I got to see many different communities and the delineations between social class in terms of

> physical and social geography became obvious over time. I could not understand how other people did not recognize, or care how social class determined how people were treated, both in and out of school. In school, poor kids were bullied because of their clothes and it was obvious that teachers had lower expectations from those kids. Yet, they never seemed to have low expectations from the kids from moneyed families. I now understand that social class confers forms of privilege that translate into greater opportunities in and out of school (John, P. 15).

John's analysis is in keeping with the assertions of many literacy scholars who claim that the forms of literacy imparted in public schools are more about social reproduction than social empowerment (Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 1998) and also parallels work in critical pedagogy that explicates how social class tends to bind children into curricular forms that narrowly define social agency (Giroux, 1997; Shannon, 1998; Kincheloe, 2004). However, what is of particular interest here is how this excerpt reveals how the critical reflection of life experiences leads to newer and more complete understandings of the self and its relation to the social world. The nature of these critical analyses also serves to highlight how the majority of subjects in this study failed to engage in this type of analysis.

Data regarding issues of gender in education were reported in only five papers, with two American females, two Korean females, and one Korean male reporting. What is surprising about this data is that the data from the four females was primarily descriptive and displayed little analytical depth beyond expressions of unfairness, while the one male reporting on this issue does so in a discursive way that links the gender bias in education to wider social phenomena such as economics, politics, and culture. The following data exemplifies the descriptive nature of the responses to issues of gender in education:

> I'm not sure when I recognized that girls were encouraged to study

> different subjects than boys, like studying to be a teacher, but I remember thinking that it was not fair (Eun-mi, p. 8).
>
> Girls and boys were treated differently. Girls could not demand help or get answers to questions in some subject areas…In certain classes they seemed to expect you should never have a question and that you should know it already. I believe they did not want to help (Lisa, p. 1).

This data shows that both participants are cognizant of the gender inequality in education, and are unhappy about it, but do not attempt to deconstruct the causes of this inequality or try to determine in what ways this inequality played a part in the construction of their own gender identities. It also illustrates how feelings of gender bias in education are shared across the cultures represented in this study. However, Ho-jun's analysis of how education and media construct gendered identities goes far beyond the usual descriptive responses by reflecting on Korean television programming that:

> …dealt with femininity as weak, dependant, docile, and non self-determined. Female protagonists' lives were always at the mercy of their male spouse. Sometimes, some of them appeared as slaves to materialism and consumerism. Just as femininity was twisted and negatively stereotyped, masculinity was extremely misperceived. The image of masculinity as ideal presented in the soap dramas or other forms of mass media was the very gentleman from an upper middle class who are highly educated expecting a prosperous future…Marriage turns into a bargain of sex and money, a celebration of life which is exclusively granted to the rich (p. 9).

Here, Ho-jun traverses the discursive relationships among education, gender, social class, and media in terms of social justice and social agency. Moreover, he also recognizes that although men are privileged into the

dominant position in gender relationships across society, their roles are also constructed through the same discursive processes in ways that are not altogether positive, thereby making the implicit argument that all gender roles need to be critically examined. While it is not within the scope of this study to ascertain why only a male participant undertook a critical reflection of gender, various theories suggest that this lack of response may be an issue of "voice". Theories of "voice" or the "right to signify" are detailed within feminist theory (Bordo, 1999), critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1997), cultural studies (Hall, 1997; Giroux, 2005), and sociology (Foucault 1984, Bourdieu, 1991) and relate that socially marginalized groups tend to be silenced in a variety of ways, or as Bourdieu (1992) puts it: "…authority comes to language from outside (p. 168)". As such, it may not be that surprising that the issue of gender garnered much in depth analysis.

Social Interactions

The data on the impact of social interactions primarily focused on subjects' literacy practices in the home and their relationship with teachers. The majority of papers reported on the nature of home literacy, with 7 western and 6 Asian papers asserting that home literacy played a large part in their early lives. As with the majority of the data gathered in this study, the data for this code was primarily descriptive of the nature of individual subject's home literacy practices, as opposed to the four critical papers that reflected on this issue in some depth. Although the narratives on home literacy were descriptive, the data between western and Asian subjects differed in that the Asian subjects reported a greater emphasis placed on literacy and education in ways that might be described as reverence in some of the narratives. Rachel and Robert exemplify how the narratives of western participants tended to speak of education as something taken for granted, they write:

> Literacy came at an early age, with my mom and dad reading to me and my older sister and younger brother every night. We also had the luxury of a local library with youth programs, so reading was always considered a fun activity for me (Rachel, p. 1).

> I never really liked school much. I never saw that it really had much to do with my life, or who I was as a person. It just seemed like something you had to do to make older people happy and to get a god job later in life (Robert, p. 5).

Here both Rachel and Robert address literacy and education as something that is a natural and necessary part of life, not as something that is precious or needs to be assiduously taken advantage of. This matter-of-fact tone is contrasted by Chung-ae and Ling who were brought up to approach literacy and education as things to respect and strive for. They write:

> My father couldn't afford to buy new books for us. Instead he bought old books from the bookstore and removed all of the marks and scribbling with an eraser as much as he could. He taught me to handle the books as a treasure and appreciate the author's effort and wisdom to write a book (Chung-ae, p. 6).

> My father was my first teacher. He taught me many words in Chinese and English and a respect for language and learning. He said that using a language properly and learning everything that we are taught shows honor and respect for our culture and the authors who spent so much time and effort to write the books we read (Ling, p. 4).

This difference between these two excerpts are representative of the data between western and Asian subjects on this code and seems to suggest a sense of entitlement to education for the western subjects as opposed to cultural memories of education as a privilege for the Asian participants. It is both interesting and surprising that of the four critical narratives,

home literacy was discussed in terms of encouraging education instead of shared reading and intellectual discussion. As such, home literacy was not considered to be a major part of their intellectual development. While this finding tends to go against the findings of most literacy scholars that relate a strong correlation between lower social class and a lack of effective home literacy practices (Street, 1995; Gee, 1998), this bifurcation of data may be an effect of social class in that all of the subjects who wrote critical narratives came from underprivileged homes.

The majority of subjects that wrote about their relationships with teachers tended to do so in a negative manner that portrayed teachers as being disinterested or dictatorial. Others reported that there were some good teachers in the sense that they seemed to genuinely care for the students and tried to do a good job, but that the curriculum and pedagogy remained uninteresting and detached from their lives. These portrayals of teacher-student relationships were similar across cultures. The four "critical" papers on the other hand, all wrote about one special teacher that reached them on a personal and intellectual level in ways that changed their lives. Ling gives a poignant example of this in her story of one of her teachers during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, she writes:

> Teachers were still gods, but this one was different. We still had the politics in class all the time, but this teacher encouraged me to read and gave me books I could bring home to read. The books were not about communism but were real Chinese literature. I knew that this was dangerous for him to do, so I kept it to myself…because of him I got interested in learning and began to see that many of the things that I was taught were not true: that they (the government) were just trying to make me think and act in a certain way….As a teacher, It also tells me that you can touch the life of a student and open the world for them (p.11).

Here, Ling weaves her alienation from traditional, rote learning forms

of education through a special relationship with a teacher that began her real education: reflection upon the social contexts of her life and the situating of knowledge within those contexts. Most compelling, is how she takes the bravery of this teacher, and the path it put her on, and uses it as a foundation for her philosophy of teaching.

Media

As media and theories of representation were a significant topic in the literature and discussions of each of the classes, all of the narratives addressed media to some extent. However, as with the other analytical codes that emerged from the data, most responses merely described media that the subjects either enjoyed, or were part of their home literacy practices, as opposed to the critical narratives that reflected on the influence of media on their lives to some depth. As such, there was great similarity in how students from both the Asian and western groups addressed the issue of media. The following two excerpts are representative of the majority of data on media influences:

> Dad bought me a set of video cassettes called Muzzy, which is a cartoon that teaches English in different story settings. From Muzzy, I learned the language, but also some basic intercultural sensitivity such as what people eat and do in foreign countries (Tao, p.8).

> I liked to watch cartoons, like Loony Toons, and sports programs when I was growing up. I don't know that they had any great impact on my life, I guess that I watched basically the same thing as other kids, so I was pretty normal (John, p. 10).

Apart from the critical narratives, the only real difference between subjects portrayal of media influences was that Asian students tended to focus

on instructional media as opposed to popular media. In all of these cases, however, subjects were either unwilling or unable to reflect on how media affected their lives, or believed that media was not an important issue in the construction of their identities. In the either case, it appears that either the subjects did not understand the literature and course discussion on media literacy and theories of representation, or they did not believe it to be an important issue in their lives.

The data on the influence of media and the construction of subjects' knowledge, beliefs, and values from the four critical narratives greatly differed from the other narratives in the depth of their analysis in terms of how it related to their individual lives and the effects media has on society. Ho-Jun chose to illustrate the potential effects of media by focusing on a particular television commercial selling a credit card.

> But a hidden message of this credit card commercial is that you are competent and all right only in the case you can consume, so prove your potential with this card. The conception of power is purposely related to the amount of money you can spend. In this context, I am identified and perceived as meaningful existence as I am able to buy and consume products of industry whether they are material and tangible or cultural and invisible. I am forced to realize myself by consumption. I buy a Big Mac Set. I buy Nike sneakers, I buy a Hyundai car, I buy an American insurance program, I buy internet access, I buy English conversation course, I buy a chance to take the TOEFL test…I am manipulated to think buying is the way to present myself to others in this society (Ho-jun, p. 14).

Here, Ho-jun explicitly focuses on the construction of identity in terms of the power of media representations within a consumer society by viscerally illustrating that knowledge of the workings of media representations does not mean that he is not still subject to them. This notion of the dialectic relationship between the consumer and media,

as well as the complicitous nature of the consumer, is well known within the fields of cultural studies (Hall, 1997; Bordo1999; Kincheloe, 2004; Giroux, 2005) and media literacy (Semali & Pailliotet, 1998). Other responses to the power of media in the critical narratives were similar to Ho-jun's in that they focused on connecting media representations to specific issues, such as gender, social class, and race. As media representations speak to a plethora of issues in the construction of individual and social identities, it is understandable that the participant's coached their responses in terms of specific examples.

Religion

Religion was a topic that surfaced in 9 of the corpus narratives, with 6 from the western group and 3 from Korean subjects. Apart from the two critical narratives that addressed religion, all other responses did not reflect on the meanings that religion created in their lives and focused on the descriptions of events and experiences. Typically, these responses revolved around religion as being an important aspect of family membership, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> Because I went to a Catholic school, books we read at home and in school were typically the bible, or stories written for children that were focused around the Old Testament. Because of this, we were not typically exposed to literature other kids our age were reading, but rather became fluent in ancient traditions and vocabulary used in the Old Testament…I guess I am still religious, except that I don't often go to church (Robert, p. 8).

> My family is Christian and religion has always been an important part of my life. I still go to church with my family every Sunday and I think it helps me to be a good person (Eun-mi, p. 4).

This data illustrates the importance of religion as a cross-cultural marker of individual and social identity to half of the participants in this study, particularly as religion was not a topic of discussion, or represented in the literature in any of the courses taken by the participants. In addition, it needs to be stated that of all the analytical codes that emerged from the data, religion was the least examined in terms of how it served to influence subjects' discursive identities.

Evan was the only participant that attempted any form of critical reflection of his religious beliefs. His willingness to address this issue may be due to his experience as a practicing priest whose experiences led him to quit the church. In the following passage, he reflects on his reasons for leaving the church. Evan states that he:

> …could not escape from the dark, sanctimonious shadow of religious dogma, and the subsequent demands placed on me by a church hierarchy that covertly regarded "caring" as a means of manipulating people into becoming converts. If I had found any value in the narrative pertaining to Christ it was of a man who supposedly lived his life for the *other*, a man who shunned the institutionalized, religious power-hierarchy of his day – not the symbolic man-whore flaunted by denominational Christian churches over the centuries, often for little reason other than to fill their pews and coffers in the misguided hope of simultaneously filling *heaven* as well. Contrary to the hubris so characteristic of the hierarchy, the religion I encountered among many of the poor was a humble albeit opiate, pragmatic affair, yet nonetheless one vulnerable to social control and abuse (Evan, p. 8).

Here, Evan traces his break with religion to the interplay between his personal experiences, in terms of his life within the church and the lives of the community, the literature of the church, and the social outcomes of this dynamic. While this shows a depth of reflection and analysis not present in the other narratives, it raises the question of why religious

beliefs were the only widely share topic that uniformly was not subjected to critical reflection. As one of the author's of a critical narrative, Ho-jun obviously felt the need to explain his reluctance to subject his religious beliefs to critical scrutiny by stating:

> I need to confess I have a very limited agency in deconstructing my identity as a catholic since it is deeply rooted in my heart and is connected with the very reason for being, doing, and living. Nevertheless, it is one of the most significant identities that construct "I" (p. 11).

Interestingly, Ho-jun is not specific as to whether his "very limited social agency" in this area is personal or social. However, as part of being a catholic is related to a congregation and as the Catholic Church crosses national and cultural boundaries, it is reasonable to suggest that this reluctance, or limited social agency, it is both an individual and social phenomenon. It needs to be stated that it is not the purpose of the author of this study to criticize, or otherwise denigrate, religions or religious beliefs, but to report that the data in this study suggests there is a tendency for people to avoid religious beliefs in a critical examination of the constructions of their own systems of knowledge, values, and beliefs. However, as religious practices have real outcomes in the social world, it raises the question as to whether a meaningful form of critical consciousness may be achieved if a fundamental facet of individual and social identity may not be scrutinized.

Conclusion

The findings of this were bifurcated into descriptive and critical categories of narratives based on the depth and quality of reflective analyses apparent in the narratives, with 16 and 4 papers respective. Although the data presented here was subjected to analysis and interpretation, it also served

the function of giving "voice" to subjects' lived experiences. As such, the analyses presented in this study are, by definition, subjective and are not meant to serve as a form of knowledge applicable across contexts, but are intended to give informed interpretations of the data within the context of the study while at the same time giving voice to the subjects and allowing readers to form their own interpretations. This multifold purpose in research structure is consistent with forms of critical autobiography (Church, 1995). The data from the descriptive papers in this study suggest that there are similarities and differences in the construction of identity in terms of individual and social systems of knowledge, beliefs, and values between Asian and western graduate students in TESOL. While the research corpus of this study was too small to make strong claims, the data suggests that a general feeling of dissatisfaction with education exists between cultures in terms of test-based curricula and how inequalities in social class and gender affect the quality of education. In each of the cases it was shown that the general perceptions of these issues were shared across cultures, but were shared in different, nuanced ways that reflected the differences between cultures; such as expressions of the inequalities of social class being issues of public anger by western subjects as opposed to Asian responses of public acknowledgements of inequality and suggested private anger or dissatisfaction. These subtleties of similarity and difference emerged in the data regarding social interactions, the media, and religion as well. The data on education and social interactions shared a common conception of the importance of home literacy and education to their lives, while suggesting a different perspective of the importance of education. Specifically, the data suggests that the western subjects perceived public education as a given entitlement in their lives, whereas Asian students evinced a greater sense of respect for education as a privilege. Similarly, the data regarding the influences of media differed between these groups in that the Asian respondents tended to focus on instructional media as opposed to popular media. The one area of a more

complete agreement between cultures lay in the data on religion, where the majority of responses spoke of religion as being a central, yet unexamined component of their lives.

The most striking differences in the data reported in this study are illustrated in the differences between the narratives that were judged as being either descriptive or critical. The data reported here clearly shows the differences between the two categories in terms of the depth of reflection, analysis, and connections to the social world demonstrated by each subject that wrote a critical narrative. The obvious question is why were there so few critical narratives when all of the students were being exposed to critical and post-structural/postmodern literature and classroom discussions of these issues? While the four subjects in question all wrote about the importance of home literacy, which agrees with current theories of literacy that relate the importance of home literacy to intellectual development (Street, 1995; Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 1998), this data does not fully explain why sixteen students did not engage in a critical reflective analysis of their lives. It needs to be stated that while the data in this study does not report on how the students fared in the courses for which the literacy autobiographies were written, students were generally active in each of the respective courses and showed varying levels of understanding of the literature, thereby demonstrating that they had acquired the understandings and tools necessary for the terminal assignment. Moreover, some students in these courses went on to write critical theses and attend Ph.D. studies n critical pedagogy. As such, further qualitative studies are needed to ascertain the answer to this question. However, the data does suggest that most students are reluctant to either undertake this kind of intellectual work, or are unwilling to do so in a public manner.

As there were only four critical narratives out of a corpus of twenty papers, the data reported in this paper also cannot definitively address the questions of how different cultures approach and understand the types of literature represented in the courses subjects took in preparation for

their terminal papers, or if there are cultural differences that either foster or deter critical introspection. However, the distribution of the four critical narratives evenly across Asian and western groups suggests that while there may be differences between cultures in their approaches to, and understanding of, critical literature and inquiry, the ability to engage in such work is not culturally bound. That being said, the data does reflect a greater willingness to engage in critical introspection and a greater depth of analyses by the Asian subjects. Although the small corpus size does not allow definitive statements in this area, the data from the critical narratives of Asian subjects was qualitatively superior to the narratives of the western subjects. John's narrative shows intermittent flashes of critical introspection, but these instances are fewer and of less depth than those shown in Evan's, Cho's, and Ling's narratives. However, the data presented here does show a commensurate depth of analysis between Evan's, Cho's, and Ling's narratives, which suggests that students from the Asian cultures represented in this study may be more willing to engage in critical introspection. Literature from education (McLaren, 1995; Dubois, 2005) and sociology (Foucault, 1984; Bourdieu, 1991) relates that people from less dominant social groups must have a greater understanding of social and power relationships than those of dominant groups. Dubois' (2005) theory of double consciousness and Giroux's (2005) conception of borderland pedagogies are representative of the relationship between social positioning and a discursive understanding of the social world in terms of the differences between assumed entitlement and the vicissitudes of unequal status. As much of the critical literature in applied linguistics frames issues of globalization in terms of western hegemony (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999), the supposition that Asian graduate students may be more amenable to critical literature and introspection than their western counterparts. Finally, it may also be suggested that critical consciousness is something that is learned through the forms of literacy that we are subjected to over our lives. While it

may be that students from all cultures are the same in their abilities to acquire a critical perspective, it is clear that the forms of literacy embedded in current education, and the other literacy practices gained and used through social interactions and media, in large measure dictate student's ability and/or willingness to cultivate a critical consciousness. Street (1995) clearly summates this idea by stating that:

> Every literacy is learnt in a specific context in a particular way and the modes of learning, the social relationships of students and teachers are modes of socialization and acculturation. The student is learning cultural models of identity and personhood, not just how to decode script or to write a particular hand. If that is the case, then leaving the critical process until after they have learnt many of the genres of literacy used in that society is putting off, possibly forever, the socialization into a critical perspective (p. 140).

If Street is correct, then it follows that as critical educators we should not necessarily expect students to engage and understand the diverse literatures and ideas that we expose them to, but rather rejoice in the fact that some of our students indeed embrace these ideas and begin their journey towards a critical consciousness.

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