
Feature Article

An Ethnographic Interpretation of Disciplinary Power Within the EFL Classroom

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本論は、大学のEFL授業における「規律の権力（disciplinary power）」の作用について考察する。特に、「座席の指定」と「リフレクション・ペーパー」という二つの事例を取り上げ、そこに潜在する権力関係をミシェル・フーコーの代表的著作『監獄の誕生—監視と処罰』における議論を援用しながら明らかにする。考察の結果、EFL授業における「規律の権力」を教師が巧みに利用することで、学生を主体とした学びの共同体を作り出すことが可能であると結論する。

Introduction

This article is concerned with how to establish a sense of discipline within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms at the university level. Some college English instructors are fortunate enough to guide highly motivated students to refine their already adequate communicative English skills, while other less fortunate ones (if it is fair to use such an expression) must begin by cultivating their students' motivation and willingness to learn English. In either case, however, appropriate control of classroom activities is the key to success in any EFL class (or perhaps in any class). How can college English instructors bring a necessary sense of discipline (i.e., externally or internally imposed willingness to learn) into their classes? To answer this critical question, I reflect on my experiences teaching English at a Japanese university and identify some effective strategies to motivate the students to be more engaged in the class activities.

In my later analysis of the function of disciplinary power within EFL classes, I will rely on the French philosopher Michel Foucault's contemplation on power within modern society. In a sense, Foucault's series of work (e.g., 1972; 1977; 1978) have focused primarily on explicating the process in which power is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through discursive practices within a society. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), perhaps his most widely read volume, Foucault illustrates how the external discipline of bodies (e.g., imprisonment) leads to the internal discipline of minds (e.g., normalization of the prisoner's soul). Viewing a classroom as a small society (Dewey, 1963; Freire, 1970), I apply this Foucauldian notion of discipline in interpreting the power dynamics within EFL classrooms.

This reflective analysis is an ethnographic one, which involves a certain amount of description. This description is necessary to obtain a deeper understanding of the communicative phenomena under investigation. As noted American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, pp. 3-30) convincingly argued, "thick description" is fundamental to grasping the meaning of local cultural practices. Although some readers might find some of my description redundant or unnecessary, conversely I believe that they are significant in "showing" (not necessarily "telling") what is actually happening in the classroom. In addition, this article does not begin with a review of existing literature to generate hypotheses, followed by sections explicating research method, analysis, discussion, and so forth, as required for a standard positivist research paper. Instead, the humanistic orientation of this article dictates beginning with rich illustrations of each case, followed by inductive analyses of those cases then supported by relevant theoretical work, in this case Michel Foucault's philosophical reflection on disciplinary power. For this reason, I would ask the reader to be patient and open to this perhaps unfamiliar mode of writing.

At this point, it seems academically ethical for me to state that I

am trained not in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) but in Communication Studies. Therefore, I am more familiar with the literature and way of thinking frequently employed in my own field than with those in TESOL. Furthermore, I have been teaching English at a Japanese university for just over three semesters, after having taught undergraduate communication courses in the U.S. for several years (see Hanaki, 2007, for details). Therefore, I have considerably less experience as an EFL instructor than many of the readers. However, I do not believe that this diminishes my credibility as the author of this article. At times, a new insight can be obtained by shedding new light onto a familiar issue from a different angle. In that sense, my expertise in another academic field and lack of experience in EFL could have the potential to bring an alternative perspective to the study of human interaction within EFL classrooms.

Ethnographic Data

The ethnographic data for this analysis was obtained from my experience teaching English for three semesters at a private university in central Japan. In 2006, I taught courses in English communication and English reading to students majoring in information sciences; those students were mostly male and not very motivated to learn English. This academic year, I have been teaching courses in English communication, English reading, and English writing to the students majoring in British and American language and culture; those students are mostly female and generally highly motivated to learn English. The size of the classes was between 20 and 30 students in both cases. From these teaching experiences, the following sections draw on two particular cases that are especially pertinent to understanding the function of disciplinary power within EFL classrooms, that is, the cases concerning seat assignment and reflection paper.

Seat Assignment

Let us begin this section with a quote from my teaching notes from one of the first English communication courses that I taught. The course was designed for information sciences majors.

Before beginning to teach this class, I had never thought of assigning seats for college students. I wanted my students to sit anywhere they felt comfortable so they could concentrate on their study. Respecting the students' spontaneity, I did not impose a sitting arrangement in this English class. As a result, the students usually sat in the same place with the same friends in every class. The first few classes went well. The students concentrated on the class activities, including much of the English conversation practice with their friends. After a while, however, the students became excessively used to talking to the same friends, lost concentration, and sometimes began talking with friends in Japanese. I asked them to change partners as necessary, but they were not willing to do so. Therefore, I decided to assign different seats to the students every time we met so that they could practice conversations with a variety of partners.

The students seemed to dislike this system of seat assignment initially. Many of them said, "I feel uncomfortable sitting and talking with unfamiliar classmates." I told them, "You will feel uncomfortable only in the beginning. You will get to know all of your classmates before too long, and then you will feel more comfortable. There are 30 students in this room. It would be boring if you kept talking with the same people throughout the year. We can learn much more from differences than from similarities. Try to talk to different people each time. That is an important communication skill to learn." As the semester proceeded, the students gradually began to understand the

benefits of talking with a diverse set of classmates. The more they did not know about their conversation partner, the more topics they had to discuss with each other. At the end of the semester, many students wrote on a feedback form, "I enjoyed talking to many different people in this class." Although it would be ideal if the students could start a conversation with a new partner spontaneously, seat assignment could be an effective alternative.

Since this time, I have consistently assigned seats in most of my English classes with much success. Since I decided to introduce the system from the beginning of the course, very few students have complained about it. Seat assignment enables students to practice their English with different classmates every time. Even when the students repeat the same exercises in a series of classes, they could be stimulated and enlivened by continuous encounters with new classmates. At the same time, seat assignment prevents the students from forming exclusive peer groups. Yet, what does this case of seat assignment inform us in terms of establishing a sense of discipline within the classroom?

The central issue here is that by assigning seats regardless of the students' own preferences, the teacher is exercising disciplinary power over the students' bodies, and the discipline over the students' bodies leads to the discipline over their minds. To clarify this point, Michel Foucault's (1977) influential volume *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* provides theoretical support.

In Part III of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) argues that by distributing the body within a certain space and restricting the behavior according to a certain time schedule, society shapes the souls of the people. The discipline of the body leads to the discipline of the soul, so that the person can be incorporated into society. Foucault uses the word normalization to call this incorporation of a person into society. When society fails to normalize a person, the person becomes deviant

or criminal. Criminals must be sent to the prison where their bodies are disciplined and their souls are normalized.

Because the classroom is a small society characterized by its own unique politics (Dewey, 1963; Freire, 1970), the Foucauldian analysis of modern society reasonably applies to the function of disciplinary power within EFL classrooms. Seat assignment demonstrates the teacher's exercise of authoritative power in distributing each student's body to a certain place at a certain time. This practice not only enables the students to interact with a variety of classmates but also instills a sense of discipline into the mind of each student. The distribution of students' bodies across the classroom forces their minds to follow the educational norm set by the course. Thus, seat assignment represents the implicit dimension of discipline, adjusting students to the course objectives.

Reflection Paper

In a similar vein, the following episode from my teaching notes illustrates yet another potential way in which a sense of discipline could be attained. This note is about the same course as the previous one.

I wished my students to be truly interested in learning English so that they would participate in class activities without any reward or punishment from the teacher. With that spirit, after discussing a basic pattern of conversation on a specific topic (e.g., talking about movies, staying at a hotel, etc.) from the textbook, I simply asked my students to have a free conversation with an assigned partner based on the conversation model. However, after managing to utter a few English sentences, most of the pairs tended to start chatting in Japanese or just stopped talking. I wondered why they were not willing to continue the conversation. They might have lacked confidence

in their English, or they might have felt uncomfortable talking to unfamiliar classmates in any case. If not, the students might have tried to pass the class with the least effort, especially when their major was not directly related to English, as in this case. It would also be possible that the students did not want to show off their English skills in front of other students because the act might isolate them from the class. Some young Japanese students tend to be afraid of looking like a “good student” who is considered not so “cool.”

Whatever the reasons might have been, I needed to motivate my students somehow to take the conversation practice more seriously. After some thought, I realized that my students needed what I call “teacher’s gaze” as an incentive to be engaged in the class activities. In other words, the students had to be under some sort of educational surveillance provided by their teacher in order to focus on the conversation practice. Nevertheless, it was impossible for me to attend to all the conversations by the 15 pairs of students at the same time. Therefore, I decided to ask the students to write down their conversations on a sheet of paper. At the end of the class, I collected the written conversations and graded them. In this way, if the students wanted better grades, they had to take the practice seriously. At the same time, I was able to see how each pair of students was doing even if I missed observing their conversations in class. By providing the students with some reason (or excuse), they felt more motivated and safer to approach the class activity with a more positive attitude.

As with the previous one, the note quoted above described my struggle in teaching the students majoring in information sciences. In an English communication course that I am currently teaching

to the students majoring in British and American language and culture, I experience less difficulty in facilitating the students' active participations in class discussions. Those students are generally more committed to refining their English and seem to consider that it is "cool" to speak English well in front of other students. However, I still need to remind the students of the sense of "being gazed at" by the teacher occasionally in some form. For that purpose, I often ask the students to write down how they have participated and what they have learned on that day at the end of class. In this way, I can introduce some sense of surveillance in class while following the learning experiences of each student to a certain degree.

To further contemplate on this issue of "teacher's gaze," let us turn again to Foucault's (1977) powerful philosophical metaphor of "the Panopticon" (pp. 195-228). The Panopticon is a type of prison that consists of a hollow cylinder with an observation tower at its center. Each prisoner is located in small cells created in the hollow cylinder. Each cell is separated from every other and designed to face the observation tower. Guards can observe each prisoner anytime from small holes in the observation tower, while the prisoners cannot see either the guards or the other prisoners. Sometimes, the guards might not be observing the prisoners, but the prisoners never know whether the guards are actually observing them or not. Consequently, the prisoners always live with a sense of being observed by the guards.

Applying Foucault's argument to the case above, the students and the teacher in an EFL classroom correspond respectively with the prisoners and the guard in the Panopticon. The students feel that their classroom activities are being gazed at by the teacher because they have to submit a reflection paper describing what they have done that day at the end of the class. The students know little about what the other students have written on their papers. The reflection paper represents a unidirectional correspondence between each of the students and the teacher. The teacher might closely look at each paper or just quickly

skim over it. Regardless of this fact, each student always feels exposed to the teacher's gaze, similar to the sense of surveillance the prisoners experience in Panopticon. In this manner, by asking the students to reflect on their classroom experiences and submit a paper at the end of the class, the teacher could introduce a sense of pedagogical surveillance into EFL classrooms.

Balancing the Use of Disciplinary Power and Students' Spontaneity

The previous sections described two illustrative cases from my teaching experiences: one concerning seat assignment and the other concerning reflection papers. Then, I employed Foucault's discussions on disciplinary power to interpret those two cases. In essence, I argued that in order for the students to feel motivated to learn, the teacher needed to introduce some sense of discipline in such forms as seat assignment and reflection paper. If the balance between the sense of discipline imposed by the teacher and the students' spontaneity to learn is maintained, the classroom would become an engaged learning community where diverse ideas and opinions converse with each other (see Hanaki, 2007).

As a successful example, in the English reading class that I am currently teaching, I ask my students to bring in one article written in English to each class. The article can be from newspapers, magazines, or any other publication outlets as long as it is interesting for everyone in class (including the teacher) and relevant to the university classroom. The topics of the reading materials range from hard social issues such as the environment, health, crime, politics, and economics to soft cultural issues such as fashion, music, and cooking. The significant point here is that these topics are not provided by the teacher based on his educational agenda but brought in by the students based on their respective interests. The students first read and summarize the article,

and then present and discuss the ideas with each other. To assist the students in maintaining a necessary sense of discipline, I collect the summary of the article and reflection on the class discussions from each student. In this way, I maintain the balance between the sense of discipline imposed by me as the teacher and the students' spontaneity to learn.

An English communication course that I am also teaching at present might provide another successful yet more student-centered case. This course is designed entirely as a series of students' presentations and subsequent discussions. Each day, two pairs of students sign up for a presentation for 30-40 minutes. The pair is responsible for class activities during the allocated time, and the rest of the students are expected to actively participate in the activities. The presentation should be as interactive as possible. The assigned pair must pose discussion questions, offer a group task, or facilitate a debate. I observe the class interactions and assist the presenters as necessary, but basically remain as one of the participants in the class activities. At the end of the class, I ask the students to write an evaluation paper to each pair of presenters as well as a self-evaluation paper on their own participations. I collect and read all the papers. Then, I pass the evaluation papers to each pair of presenters and return the self-evaluation papers to individual students. In this case, my teaching role is decentralized as much as possible to encourage the students to be responsible for their own leaning, yet I still introduce a minimum sense of discipline.

Conclusion

Both the English reading class for sophomores and the English communication class for juniors and seniors described above are designed for the students majoring in British and American language and culture. I must admit that such radical distribution of pedagogical responsibilities and democratization of classroom activities might be

possible only given highly motivated students with sufficient English skills. Nevertheless, I believe that these two cases demonstrate some potential of the balanced use of disciplinary power within EFL classrooms in creating a more engaged, student-centered learning community.

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