
Opinion & Perspective

Ethnography, Foucault, and Soul Control: A Response to Hanaki

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In an article in the previous issue of the OnCUE Journal the interpretations that Toru Hanaki (2007) presents seem to be soul-destroyingly weighted towards control and discipline. While at first he appears to write with commanding academic language, on reflection his use of some terms is rather superficial. Also, though he presents some convincing ideas, they are mingled with less compelling misinterpretations of theory. In this response, I specifically question Hanaki's interpretation of the term "ethnographic" and his application of Foucault's notion of discipline to the EFL classroom.

In outlining his approach to research, it is uncertain why Hanaki considers that qualitative research is unfamiliar to OnCUE readers in Japan. Even if this were the case, I do not think his article contributes to readers' understanding of ethnography. Indeed, it is not clear why he refers to his reflection as an "ethnographic one" (p.20) when neither his data nor his interpretations seem ethnographic. Furthermore, it is unclear whether his intention is to report an ethnographic study or only to make an interpretation that is ethnographic. If the latter is the case, this naturally begs the question: Is it possible to make an ethnographic interpretation of a teaching situation without actually conducting ethnographic research in that teaching situation?

Twenty years ago Watson-Gegeo (1988) stated that "Many studies bearing the name ethnographic are impressionistic and superficial rather than careful and detailed" (p. 575), and if we take Hanaki's article as such an example, then this still seems to apply today. While

ethnography cannot be easily defined, there are common identifiable characteristics one would expect to find in an ethnographic study, such as taking a holistic perspective, making detailed and prolonged observations of a social group in a natural setting, offering an emic viewpoint (an interpretation of how the participants in the study view the meanings of their own interactions), interviewing the participants, and developing a culturally specific framework. While these represent only a brief outline of some of the important aspects of ethnography, as well as for other kinds of qualitative inquiry, there does not appear to be much evidence of any of these defining characteristics in Hanaki's study, and certainly not sufficient to warrant the statement that "this reflective analysis is an ethnographic one" (p.20).

There is also something of a contradiction in how Hanaki invokes Geertz (1973) to justify his use of descriptive detail when the only empirical data Hanaki refers to are his teaching notes and students' evaluations. I would suggest that the quotations from the notes contain nothing like the thickly described scenes we would expect of an ethnographic study. For example, Hanaki states, "I decided to assign different seats to the students every time we met" (p.22), but there are no details as to how he went about this. Did he assign seats by directing the students once they had entered the classroom? Did he devise a seating plan and have students look for their names on the plan before taking their assigned places? How did he keep a record to ensure the students were always mixed as he intended? What did he do if students objected? Furthermore, how was the classroom arranged? What kind of furniture was there? Were the students able to physically move their seats? What was the lighting like in the classroom? What noises could be heard from outside? I am not being facetious here, because the answers to all these questions could feasibly have a bearing on the students and on their learning.

Hanaki states that "Although some readers might find some of my description redundant or unnecessary, conversely I believe that these

details are significant in “showing” (not necessarily “telling”) what is actually happening in the classroom” (p.20). However, from the meagre descriptive detail that he does give it is not possible for readers to recreate the scene; and so, in fact, he does not “show” us what is actually happening in the classroom at all. Rather, the quotations from his notes and his prose are more significant for their lack of detail than their thick description. Clearly, then, the term “ethnographic” does not seem justified.

The second point I wish to address here concerning Hanaki’s article is his misguided reading of Foucault. Coincidentally, the evening before I read Hanaki’s article, a group of colleagues and I were sitting around discussing aspects of qualitative research. At one point someone asked “What is the point of theory in qualitative studies?” Later in the discussion, someone mentioned that in qualitative studies sometimes there is a jarring juxtaposition between the theory and the interpretation of the data. I would suggest that Hanaki’s article, in which he uses a “Foucauldian notion of discipline in interpreting the power dynamics within EFL classrooms” (p.20), seems exemplary of this kind of muddling mismatch.

In fact, the application of Foucault’s ideas is not so much jarring as disturbing. It is disturbing on two accounts: first, I think he misrepresents Foucault, and second, he alludes to a comparison between a prison and an EFL classroom: “the students and the teacher in an EFL classroom correspond respectively with the prisoners and the guard in the Panopticon” (p.26). I should add, however, that it is also slightly disturbing to find myself trying to explain Foucault, whose work is dense and complex, and I am only a novice in reading his work. On the other hand, I am almost certain that even if I do misconstrue Foucault’s ideas here, my misrepresentation will be more uplifting than Hanaki’s.

Referring to the notion of disciplinary power, Hanaki writes that Foucault’s (1977) book provides “theoretical support” (p.23) for his

classroom seating arrangements. In his work Foucault describes how the exercise of power has undergone historical changes; for example “sovereign power” prevailed in the eighteenth century, while “disciplinary power” is a feature of the modern age. Disciplinary power has several dimensions, one of which is illustrated by the Panopticon, as outlined in Hanaki’s article. While Smith (2001) suspects that Foucault had a “grudging admiration” (p.125) for this device, I do not think Foucault was advocating it as either a means of control outside a prison, or as a model for discipline in society.

Furthermore, the principle of external surveillance leading to self-regulation does not so readily transfer to an EFL teaching situation as Hanaki suggests. I do not think physical compliance necessarily indicates an inner acceptance, at least not in a permanent sense. For example, Hanaki’s students’ bodies, in accepting his seating arrangements did not inevitably mean they had committed their souls to learning English. Smith (2001) further states that one dimension of disciplinary power operates “by changing patterns of thought and behaviour through techniques of training that worked on the bodies” (p.125). However, teaching should not be about controlling patterns of thought, but extending and increasing the ability to think. And, in EFL, ideally and ultimately, teaching involves helping students to use another language to think in. As such, Hanaki’s talk of “imposed willingness to learn” (p.19), “teacher’s gaze” (p.25) and “pedagogical surveillance” (p.27) seems too forceful and misplaced for an educational setting, particularly a university class, where encouraging autonomous learners would be a more humanistic approach.

In terms of my own experience, I teach in a high school where discipline, in the sense of class management, can be an issue. Students can clearly demonstrate their resistance to my teaching. For some, getting their hairstyle just right is far more important than the English lesson. Others get really annoyed when I wake them up. As a teacher, I must recognise the students’ power and negotiate class participation in

terms that will build mutual cooperation. This leads me to a key point Foucault makes about power: that it is omnipresent and negotiable:

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 93).

Power exists within all human relations and can be negotiated rather than just being imposed from above. **Students have power too**, and they can exercise that power in **resisting the teaching**, as well as in contributing to all aspects of classroom management and decision-making.

For me, **the most interesting of all is Foucault's work on the relationships between power, knowledge and discourses**. It is noticeable that Hanaki does not mention the Foucauldian point about how individuals are constituted by discourses. According to Smith (2001), Foucault's "studies explore the ways that knowledge operates to enmesh categories of person in relationships of power" (p.123). Part of this perspective, includes both the teacher and students being viewed as "caught" within the EFL discourse. Foucault's ideas do not so much "support" a teacher's exercise of power as explore the ways in which a teacher's power constitutes students, while at the same time defining some students as "deviant".

In concluding this response to Toru Hanaki's article, I would like to point out that of course there should be a place for the creative use of theory in EFL scholarship, for new perspectives from different angles, and indeed for alternative modes of presentation, especially in qualitative studies. For example, Atkinson (n.d.) outlines several ways in which postmodern ideas can extend thinking in the TESOL field. However, such an atypical interpretation of theory, as presented in Hanaki's article, needs to be founded on a deep understanding of that

theory, and a careful look at the implications for the EFL classroom. Furthermore, when academic terms like “ethnographic” are employed, they should neither be used lightly, nor as a cover for a lack of systematic, detailed research.

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References

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