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Sexual harassment: an issue for global language education

Abstract

This paper explores the issue of sexual harassment as a global issue of concern to all participants in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) world. It applies the principles of Critical Applied Linguistics to delineate the power-inequality relationships that are inherent in most cases of sexual harassment. Specific cases and vulnerable populations of students and teachers are outlined for a wide range of locales including, Australia, Canada, Korea, the U.S. and the U.K. Final sections focus on Japan and on a particularly at-risk group: language conversation school instructors. Considerations of the extent of sexual harassment reveal the need for decisive and comprehensive policies and interventions by bystanders everywhere to tackle this severe social ill.

Keywords: sexual harassment, language education, inequality, vulnerable, reporting, interventions

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Introduction

Sexual harassment has become a "hot topic" in recent months, mainly because of allegations against prominent Hollywood celebrities since October, 2017. Here in Japan, the case of alleged sexual assault of Ito Shiori has also focused attention on sexual violence in Japanese society. This is welcome news for participants in language education in Japan who have received little support after they sought justice as victims of harassment; most vulnerable populations would include instructors in conversation schools, graduate students who are in asymmetrical power relationships with supervisors, and high school students who experience "dating violence" with its patterns of abuse that are often initiated and/or perpetuated in educational institution settings? But what is sexual harassment exactly? To what extent is it an issue of concern for EFL educators around the world? How are language educators beginning to deal with associated issues here in Japan?

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that sexual harassment is a more serious and a more prevalent social ill than had been previously understood. A large number of allegations of sexual harassment against prominent Hollywood celebrities and high-ranking politicians in many parts of the world have only accentuated this realization. The "Me too" campaign, which had been initiated years previously for women of color in the United States, suddenly became an Internet phenomenon in late 2017. The phrase was featured on twelve million Facebook posts and the "Me too" campaign prompted a special session by the European Parliament. The sexual harassment "silence breakers" of the world were recognized as Time magazine's "Person of the Year" for 2017. Many people around the world have become acutely aware of the significance of sexual harassment as a social problem. But, what of the world of education and, more specifically, language education? Is sexual harassment a topic we should be reading about in academic journals, hearing about at conferences, and talking about in classrooms, or is this happening already? Many educational institutions have policy statements, complaint procedure codes of conduct, and protocols on sexual harassment, but is that enough?

The term "sexual harassment" has been in circulation since the early 1970's, but only became widely used during the 1990's. At the beginning of that decade, a Japanese court recognized the existence of sexual harassment as criminal behavior, and distinguished between two types: The Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching provides advice for members who have experienced sexual harassment and also clarifies the two forms of harassment that are recognized under Japanese law: "*daisho Compensation,* in which rewards or penalties are explicitly linked to sexual acts, and *kankyo surroundings,* in which the environment is made unpleasant through sexual talk or jokes, touching, or hanging sexually explicit posters" (AJET,[1] n.d.). Coercive practices can be seen as a type of sexual violence, as is clear from the World Health Organization[2] World Report on Violence and Health. Part of the given definition of sexual violence is: "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic…" Clearly then, sexual harassment is not a trivial issue as every time that perpetrators make sexualized comments or actions in a coercive manner, they are engaging in a type of sexual violence, which merits legal punishment.

Sexual harassment is certainly part of general education, both as an abusive practice within educational institutions, and as a classroom topic: A 2016-2017 investigation in the UK found that 7, 688 cases of sexual harassment by students against other students were reported during that school year in England and Wales alone,[3] Nor are tertiary level institutions irrelevant to the debate in the UK: In their investigation of sexual harassment against women academics in a UK university, Bagilhole & Woodward[4] warn their peers that "academic life can seriously damage your health." The Australian government was concerned enough about the extent of this problem that it's Human Rights Commission[5] (n.d.) posted materials on-line for instructors to use in their classrooms as part of their efforts to tackle sexual harassment. In her analysis of toxic masculinities in Australian high school classrooms, Dalley Trim[6] provides examples of domineering boys using sexually suggestive language and gestures against female classmates, and she notes that this harrying behavior often silences young women in classrooms as they feel they have "no weapon of resistance" against this type of sexual harassment. Another example with a transcript provided by the author has the student

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who responds negatively to a homophobic taunt being sent out of the classroom. Local authorities around Australia have supported "Boyswork" programs that seek to replace toxic masculinities, which encourage verbal bullying and violence, with positive gender styles that highlight non-violence and respect for the dignity of others.[7] A government agency in Canada, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, has released education fact sheets for use in schools; one fact sheet (Ontario, n.d.) is especially comprehensive as it includes homophobic and gender-based bullying within the remit of sexual harassment. This is fitting as the research findings of Psychology professor, Dorothy Espelage (2016) with 5th and 6th grade students in the U.S. found that, "Homophobic name-calling sets the stage for the development of sexual harassment. For example, when youth are called "gay" or faggot, they start to sexually harass members of the opposite sex to demonstrate that they are not gay." In addition, the Ontario Commission fact sheet provides concrete examples to explain to students what types of behavior constitute sexual harassment, including instances of teacher interactions with students: "The Ontario College of Teachers withdrew a 29-year-old teacher's license because he sexually harassed a female student through e-mail. The teacher used a false name and sent messages to the student that included information about what she had been wearing that day, what route she took to school, and sexual suggestions." An article by social work academics in the United States[8] also emphasizes the need to educate children about sexual harassment in order to reduce and eliminate a "community-wide problem that impacts all persons regardless of gender." In the long term, prevention programs will have little effect if parents, educators and lawmakers allow boys and young men to be inducted into toxic styles of masculinity that promote acts of domination by men over women and over "weak" men. The authors cite research data[9] indicating that 23% of men in the United States have experienced sexual coercion, so men are relevant, both as offenders and as victims.

If we accept the principles of critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) that educators have a responsibility to do what they can to eradicate social ills such as harassment behaviors and to promote social relations of equality, then the issue of sexual harassment should not be confined to the realm of general education. It merits inclusion in language curricula on an ongoing basis, and the needs of EFL instructors and students should be addressed. What evidence points to a positive, or negative, situation, in this regard? Helen Waldron[10] a language educator who specializes in issues of teacher identity, asserts that sexual harassment remains a taboo in many English language teaching contexts, and institutions need to work proactively with transparent codes of conduct to improve the situation: "The big taboos in ELT involve the industry itself. And the only way to deal with taboos is to stop ignoring their existence." Waldron's article is helpful, not only for its outline of eight steps that need to be taken by institutions to create "a culture of trust," but also because of its awareness of the dilemmas involved in discussing sexual harassment. Commentators can oversimplify issues when they rely on binary thinking and essentialist categories; the author avoids the use of "…such binary concepts as 'victim' and 'perpetrator'. Sexual harassment festers within outdated hierarchies and my hope is that successful resolutions will lead to a realignment of power on all sides."

Some materials-but not a large amount-can be found from a range of EFL/ESL sources. These focus on ending impunity for perpetrators and incorporating sexual harassment issues into classroom teaching objectives. The American TESOL Institute's pedagogical website, "ESL Teachers Board" features an article (Wilen n.d.) that provides coping strategies for EFL instructors working in international contexts. "Breaking news English" (n.d.) provides a teaching unit on gender-based violence in European Union contexts. In the context of Korean EFL teaching, Hyams[11] explains the need for objective codes of conduct and transparent procedures to deal with allegations of sexual harassment or assault, as there are a number of cases of EFL instructors being falsely accused of impropriety. Another issue of concern is the situation for language learners who study abroad and find that individuals in their host country take advantage of their lack of understanding of advanced level English and of local codes of behavior. Referring to the Canadian EFL context, Fryer & Wong (1998) focus specifically on the negative experiences of Japanese women who have been subjected to sexual harassment while studying abroad. In addition, a news report (CBC, 2014) on sexual harassment cases on public transport in British Columbia recounts the experience of a 29-year old Japanese woman and ESL student who was sexually harassed by an older man, who at first offered to help her purchase a SkyTrain ticket. After helping her buy the ticket, he began kissing and hugging her until she pushed him away and escaped. The woman was traumatized by the incident and began to have recurrent nightmares. Her host family became concerned and persuaded her to open up about her ordeal and to report the crime to the Vancouver police. However, as this was several months later, the likelihood of capturing the criminal was minimal. While some commentators might think that a case that "only" involves an isolated incident of hugging and kissing need not be given too much attention, they should consider the fact that the woman in question had nightmares for months afterwards, so that no incident of sexual harassment should be treated lightly.

Here in Japan, educators should be aware that the problem of sexual harassment is probably more widespread than previously thought. A recent Japan Times article[12] cites Justice Ministry figures which estimate that only 18% of cases of sexual harassment actually get reported to police. Not surprisingly, the author titles her article: "In Japan too, we need to talk about sexual harassment." Unfortunately, many perpetrators of sexual harassment, in Japan and elsewhere, are undeterred by legal penalties. In an article on harassment within the language conversation industry in Japan, Currie Robson[13] cites the following figures from a General Union survey (which did not, unfortunately, specify which types of harassment were in question): 52% of women and 48% of men had experienced some form of harassment in the workplace. Appropriate action was taken against culprits in only 15% of cases.

A large number of cases also indicate that sexual harassment is a major problem within the conversation school industry in Japan[14]. In spite of the fact that the Equal Employment Opportunity Law lays an obligation upon employers to prevent sexual harassment happening in the workplace, many victims found scant support when they reported their experiences to supervisors and area managers. In one case, over an eight-year period, a single client had attended 20,000 lessons in every Gaba conversation school in the Kanto area. He was famous for only attending classes with female instructors whom he would proceed to harass sexually with inappropriate touching and obscene statements – the example provided by one instructor was: "I want your blow job." In any other working context, one could imagine that employers would realize that an individual who was behaving in this way over a total of 20,000 lessons, posed a substantial danger and that the client in question might prove even more dangerous as a stalker or assailant.

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In view of possible dangers, it may be legitimate to include an anti-fraternization clause in employee contracts, as is the policy of Nova, to prevent intimate relationships developing between instructors and students. This is a complex issue, though, with arguments to be made on both sides. The General Union, at least, won their case, which they brought before the Osaka Human Rights Commission in 2004, to prevent Nova imposing the anti-fraternization clause.[13]

Whatever the merits or demerits of particular employment regulations, sexual harassment continues to blight the lives of many participants in language education in Japan. The problem is so severe for some female employees in the Gaba language school company that they have developed their own secret code to warn each other of predatory students who constantly cross the boundaries of appropriate behavior. In addition, six of the instructors who were consulted for the article knew of male instructors who had been targeted, so it is an issue that affects male language instructors as well as female, albeit in much smaller numbers. In his review of cases of sexual harassment in conversation schools in Japan, Currie Robson[13] cites the case of Samuel, an EFL teacher who did not experience sexual harassment but who felt he was in a very difficult situation when a female student, a recently divorced woman, expressed romantic interest. As a part-timer in the school, he wanted to have as many students as possible, but he tried to explain, as tactfully as possible, that an intimate relationship between teacher and student was not appropriate.

Mujtaba & Mujtaba[15] refer to the issue of the credibility of accusers and accused in their article for an on-line TESL journal. They argue that certain traits have to be present before accusations are to be given credence: "Tangible consequences such as a lowered grade do not have to occur to substantiate the existence of sexual harassment. If a student's emotional and psychological abilities are substantially affected, there may be enough proof that sexual harassment occurred." While the intentions of the authors are obviously genuine, it seems problematic to maintain that victims of sexual harassment need to display certain symptoms before they can obtain justice. Placing the onus on them to provide proof of harassment is also questionable. Feminists worked long and hard to establish the principle that victims of rape should be believed unless clear evidence exists against them. It seems reasonable to argue that the same principle should apply for victims of sexual harassment.

The attention that recent controversies have brought to raising awareness of the seriousness and prevalence of sexual harassment should yield some positive results for instructors and learners in EFL contexts in Japan. Already, a positive development has occurred with JALT's publication of a new code of conduct to deal with harassment at conferences.

https://jalt.org/main/jalt-code-conduct Yes, many EFL educators will feel concerned about introducing a topic that some may find upsetting; certainly, we should be prepared to provide information about professional counselling if any students seek our counsel (A dramatic example is provided by an EFL instructor in Chiba who provides accounts of students disclosing highly personal and disturbing information such as "sensei, I slashed my wrists last night".[16] However, it should be noted that many EFL instructors deal with tough topics (e.g., EFL magazine's website (n.d.) vocabulary and lesson plans on "War" "Fear" "Terrorism" and "Anger and Emotions") and this is generally accepted, if not out of a sense of social responsibility then through an awareness that language learners are more likely to push themselves to speak about topics that they feel strongly about. Research in university classrooms in Japan[17] indicate that it is possible to present sexuality-based themes in an appropriate and motivating way. Rather than being silenced by a sensitive topic like domestic violence, Yoshihara found that her students found the topic enlightening and motivating. We should be glad, then, that the topic of sexual harassment is being addressed with a wide range of initiatives within both general education and language education, and we should support these initiatives as much as possible. We can also enrich the language learning experience of our students if we provide structured opportunities for mature discussion and engagement with sexual harassment issues.

While it may be an exaggeration to speak of sexual harassment as a taboo topic within the ELT world, as Waldron[10] does, it is certainly true that a great deal of work needs to be done within many educational institutions before the issue is addressed comprehensively as an issue that concerns all women and men, girls and boys in society. When organizations and schools provide clear guidelines and procedures, the task of seeking justice is made considerably easier, both for victims and for those who want to report inappropriate behavior. If we see students being silenced in our classes because of sexually suggestive or abusive comments or behaviors, we should intervene and follow the guidelines that are designed to protect vulnerable individuals. When work colleagues have been victimized, our practical and moral support may prove invaluable, especially if the victims feel reluctant to pursue justice and challenge the perpetrators. As educators and as decent human beings we should provide that support.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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