Searching for Gems in the Mud: An Example of Critical Reflection on Research in Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical autoethnographic reflection upon a study that I had previously conducted. The original study reports on research conducted in two classes at a Japanese university on the students' attitudes towards different forms of addressing a foreign teacher in a conversational English class. The research incorporated a visualisation exercise with a free writing response in an attempt to investigate indirectly student attitudes to various forms of address. The results were inconclusive with respect to the original research objectives, because none of the proposed forms of address was found to be universally acceptable in either class. A report on the research was written, but never published. Two years later, I reflexively interrogated the text of the original report in an attempt to explore the values and beliefs that influenced the design, implementation and reporting of the original research. Thus the original research report became the data for the current study. This paper demonstrates the process that I undertook in critically reflecting upon my own research by presenting the original report (written two years ago), providing notes on my critical reflection upon that research and then discussing the implications of this approach. The paper highlights the mutability of researcher values and beliefs.

Introduction

Two years previous to this autobiographical research project, I conducted a small research project into Japanese university students' attitudes towards forms of addressing their foreign English teacher. That study adopted a creative approach in an attempt to uncover values and beliefs that the students might not be willing or able to acknowledge directly to me. The objective of the study was to determine which form of address would be most appropriate, based on the emic, or insider, perspective of the students. The research, however, failed to produce a conclusive answer to the research question. This inconclusiveness is the mud referred to in the title of this article.

Failure to reach a definitive conclusion, however, is not such an unusual outcome in research in education. The issues are complex, the contexts are rich and the stakeholders are numerous. In reflecting upon the muddy results of this project, I wondered whether anything of value might be found in it. In search of gems in the mud, I decided to engage in a critical reflection upon the research paper itself. Following Kanpol's metaphor of confession (Kanpol, 1999), I sought to be brutally honest in identifying the beliefs and values that I held in designing, conducting and reporting on the research as I currently perceive them.

This final point is of vital importance in interpreting the results of this current study. Historian Theodore Rosengarten (1979) insists that "no claim of objectivity survives the generation in which it was made" (p. 113). As is demonstrated in this paper, my values and beliefs have changed since writing the original paper only two years ago. It is quite possible that, were I to reflect upon this present paper in another two years, I would discover that my values and beliefs had changed again. One of the key findings of this autoethnographic study, then, is to highlight the highly mutable nature of researcher values and beliefs, not over the course of a generation, but within a much shorter timeframe.

This paper is an autoethnography in practice. Unlike Akerstrom, Jacobsson and Wasterfors' (2004) retrospective work, it is not the data but the research report that is reanalysed. The research report is unearthed from its time capsule, and examined with a "self-critical eye" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. vii) in an attempt to understand not so much the project findings, but the social and psychological milieu in which the research was conducted.

By "autoethnography in practice" I mean that the paper is written so that the reader can watch over my shoulder as I reflect. The original research paper – the data upon which I am reflecting – is/are presented in the main body of the paper. The findings of the current research, however, are to be found in the footnotes. This unorthodox format is in keeping with the ethos of autoethnography (Chase, 2005), attempting to disrupt traditional research practices. The disruption, however, is not purely for disruption's sake. The format adopted for this paper is in itself a metaphorical representation of the process of critical self-reflection. This kind of reflection upon my own research is a disruptive process. It requires breaking into my own stream of thought (the original paper) to challenge and question, to ponder and explore. I invite the reader to look at the data that I am looking at (the original report in the body of this paper) and then watch as I reflect upon it (the footnotes in this paper). The paper presents an action shot, if you will, of me self-reflecting. In order to avoid confusion, a different font colour has been applied to distinguish between the original report (in blue) and my reflections upon it.

Scott and Morrison (2005) identify five different types of value relevant to educational research: personal, procedural, collective, observational and epistemic (pp. 257-258). For the purposes of this study, four of these types of value were framed into interrogative points of focus, namely what this research report reveals about:

  i.   what I believed to be ethically or morally right and wrong;
  ii.   what research method I believed to be most appropriate and why;
  iii. what theories about the research context that I already held;
  iv.   how I believed that I could advance knowledge of the field or context.

The process of autoethnographic reflection that I followed was to read the original paper with the four interrogative points of focus in mind, and then note my thoughts and reflections on any areas that seemed to jump off the page. I then re-read the paper, with the notes, and added any further reflections on any aspects of the paper that attracted my attention. This process continued for several readings over a period of several months.

This procedure involves an intentional foregrounding of the "auto" in autoethnographic. Other readers of the original paper have pointed out to me aspects of the paper that they feel ought to be remedied; however, the purpose of this paper is not to 'fix' the original paper, but rather to document how I, the author of the original, now view the paper after a period of two years. What I have chosen to focus on is, in itself, a product of my current values and beliefs which have been influenced by (among other things) my reading and professional discussions.

The development of these values and beliefs might, in a further round of reflexive interrogation, reveal further insights. This cycle of reflection could hypothetically be maintained indefinitely. In this paper, however, I do not attempt to engage in this second round of reflection. Rather, I have intentionally chosen to document only my reflections on the original paper as I presently perceive them.

The Original Study (with Reflections in Footnotes)

Introduction

"Good morning. My name is Warren Midgley. You can call me 'Warren'."

This is how I used to begin my first English lesson of each new academic year at a public university in Japan. I did so for about eight years, despite the fact that most of my students never did – call me "Warren", that is. I usually got called "sensei" or "Midgley-sensei", sometimes "teacher", occasionally "Mr Warren", even less frequently "Mr Midgley" and possibly once every six months or so "Warren".

I began inviting my students to call me by my first name for two reasons[1].

1. When I was a university student in Australia, I always called my teachers, no matter what their academic standing, by their first names. I still do.

2. I believed[2] that a more informal, friendly relationship between the teacher and the students would help to ease tension in the classroom and therefore facilitate conversation practice.

The first of these is clearly a cultural issue. Many of my American friends are surprised to hear that I called all my professors by their first names too. This interesting cultural difference could be taught in the Japanese classroom, without needing to be enforced as a rule of practice.

However, the principle behind the second reason is one that I believe to be of great importance. Many scholars suggest that reducing anxiety and tension in the language classroom is beneficial (Kitano, 2001; Krashen, 1987; Oxford, 1999). The research question thus presented itself to me: how should I have the students address me in order to create a relaxed and informal environment in the classroom? Would using my first name achieve that aim? Or would it create tension? If my first name is not a good choice, is there a better one?

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[1] This acknowledgment is evidence that the study arose out of a reflexive exercise – asking myself why I had always engaged in this particular practice, and recognising that the reasons were teacher-centric (what I believed and valued) rather than student-centric. My search to uncover student attitudes to the research question, however, was not so much ethical as pedagogical. The value reflected here is that I believed that it was important to establish an address protocol that would facilitate effective language learning, as discussed later in this section of the original report.

[2] Obviously this is an explicit belief statement. Again the focus is on the pragmatic consideration of what will work, rather than the more ethical question of what I believe to be right.

By way of preliminary investigation, I asked the question to several students whom I tutored privately. All of them indicated that they thought using my first name on its own was too impolite for a classroom situation. They thought that students would feel uncomfortable with it. Some suggested that my first name, with "sensei", the Japanese suffix used for addressing teachers, attached would be a better option. I was told that this was the way that students at the local junior high school referred to their English teacher who was from Canada.

In order to decide which form of address would be best for my university classroom, I concluded that it was important to determine as accurately as possible what the students actually thought and felt about different forms of address. Does "Warren" really make them feel uncomfortable? Does "Mr. Midgley" seem too formal? How did they feel about Japanese options such as "Warren-sensei", "Midgley-sensei" or just "sensei"? The research is described below.

Method[3]

Participants

Thirty-one first year students (16 male, 15 female) and twenty five second-year students (12 male, 13 female) from a public university in Miyagi Prefecture, north-eastern Japan, were surveyed. The first year students were in a compulsory general English class; the second year students were in an elective general English class. All the students were from the School of Project Design. The survey was conducted on one day, during the scheduled class time, in the fourth week of the academic year. Therefore the first year students were relatively new to university life. Respondents were invited to reply in either English or Japanese. The Japanese responses were later translated into English by the author.

Procedure

Respondents were given the name of a fictitious 35 year old male English teacher: David Carter. They were also given a list of five[4] possible forms of address as follows:
1. David
2. Mr. Carter
3. David-sensei
4. Carter-sensei

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[3] The formal research reporting style adopted in this paper ("participants", "procedure", etc.) seems to reflect a positivist epistemology – the belief that the scientific method will produce valid and reliable findings. The real reason (as I perceive it now) for adopting this format, however, was that I believed that by being written in this style my article would be seen as good research, and might therefore be accepted for publication. Thus, this writing style is a reflection of my attempt to position (Harre & van Langenhove, 1991) myself as an expert worthy of publication. This was a higher priority for me at that time than seeking to adopt a socially just and culturally appropriate research design – the latter being a value which I currently endorse with passionate conviction.

[4] A serious weakness of the research method is that only five options were provided to the participants, and there was no opportunity for suggesting any alternatives. I chose this approach to expedite the collection of data, so this decision does not appear to be an attempt to control outcomes, although from a new paradigm inquirer perspective a vast array of control questions remains unacknowledged and therefore unexamined (see Lincoln & Guba, 2003, pp. 269-70). Values are also reflected in this methodological decision, in that I chose to accept this balance between expediency and thoroughness as acceptable. Currently I would place a far higher priority on thoroughness than on expediency.

5. Sensei.

In options 3, 4 and 5, the word "sensei" was written in kanji[5]. Other possible forms of address, such as "Teacher" and "Mr. David", were not included because they are generally considered by native speakers of English to be incorrect[6].

Respondents were instructed to close their eyes and visualise an English language classroom situation at their university, with this man as their teacher: the class is engaged in rather noisy pair work, and the respondent needs to call for the attention of the teacher, who is not looking her or his way. Respondents were asked to visualise themselves calling out to the teacher using the first of the five forms of address. They were then instructed to write down, in Japanese or English, how they felt and what they thought about using that form. They were encouraged to include any thoughts or feelings that they had about subjects such as their relationship with the teacher, the atmosphere in the classroom and so on. The visualisation exercise was then repeated for the remaining four forms of address.

A free response design was adopted to encourage respondents not to approach the task from an academic perspective (identifying the 'correct' answer) but rather to seek to identify their own thoughts and feelings about each form of address. Thus respondents were not specifically asked which form of address that they would prefer to use.

The responses were then examined to determine whether, based on the answers given, each respondent was likely to use that form of address or not. A response such as *"That's okay, I guess"* was recorded as "Would use". A response such as *"That sounds strange"* was recorded as "Would not use". In the few cases where it was unclear, "Would use" was recorded. In most cases, respondents' answers indicated that they might use more than one form of address. All of these possibilities were recorded as "Would use".

Responses that were recorded as "Would not use" were then grouped into broad categories that, for the purpose of this study, were coded "reasons". It is important to note that, in the context of the free response format, students were not specifically asked to give reasons *per se*. Therefore a more accurate description of this data field would be "the expressed attitude that indicated to the examiner that this person would not use this form of address". For the sake of simplicity, the term "reasons" has been adopted.

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[5] This is another methodological weakness that 'leapt off the page'; however, it will not be discussed here as it does not directly relate to researcher values.

[6] This statement reflects my belief at that time that students in an English as a foreign language classroom should not use forms of address that are not considered to be grammatically correct by native speakers of English. This belief has been challenged in the literature on the native speaker norm (Cook, 2002), English as a *lingua franca* (Seidlhofer, 2001), world Englishes (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Kachru, 1986), the myth of the native speaker (Davies, 2003), and language imperialism (Nero, 2005; Phillipson, 2000). However, at the time of writing I was unaware of these arguments, holding the unexamined and therefore the unquestioned belief in the existence and necessary priority of the native speaker norm in second language teaching. Having read far more extensively in this area now, I would not limit my investigation to forms that I considered (as a native speaker) to be correct.

For instance, *"That's rude"* and *"We should not use this term with someone who is older than us"* were both coded as "Reason: impolite". *"I'm not used to using that expression"* was coded as "Reason: unaccustomed". In the few cases where more than one reason was identified, only the main reason was selected. On one occasion when it was impossible to determine which of two was the main reason, the first answer given was designated as the main reason[7]. The frequency of each different reason was calculated in an attempt to identify the key influencing attitudes that would lead respondents to avoid each of the forms of address.

Results

The percentages of the total number of respondents who would use each of the five forms of address are displayed in Figure 1 below.
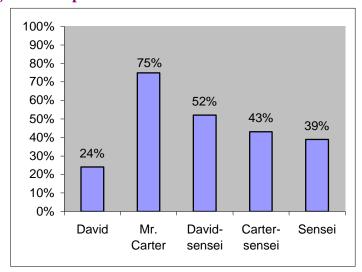
Figure 1: Respondents who would use each form of address

As predicted by the preliminary investigation, the option of using the teacher's first name alone scored the lowest of all five options. 76% of respondents' answers suggested that they would not use "David". One respondent answered in English, *"It is impossible to say."* Another stated, also in English, *"I can't use."*

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[7] A critical ethnographic (e.g., Foley & Valenzuela, 2005) perspective of this coding method might point out that the participants were not consulted in the coding process, therefore raising several important questions about validity and reliability. The glaring question for me, however, was the confidence that I had that I, an Australian researcher, could interpret and then summarise the key points of statements written by Japanese participants, without any regard for the differences that might exist between East (Japan) and West (Australia) in terms of worldview, epistemology, discourse strategies and so on. Underlying this approach is the assumption on my part that I understood the participants and their social milieu sufficiently well to know what they intended to mean, thereby assuming the questionable role of the "insulated expert" (Piantanida, Tananis, & Grubs, 2004). I still believe that I have a very good understanding of Japanese culture and Japanese language; however, for research of this nature, I would certainly want to confirm my interpretation and summary of findings with the participants.

An examination of the reasons for not using "David" revealed two key issues of equal weight (34% of all respondents). The first was that using the first name alone was considered to be rude or impolite. Several respondents mentioned the significance of the age difference – the teacher being more than 10 years their senior. The other key reason was that it was an inappropriate form of address for the classroom. One response along these lines was, *"We are not friends; we are teacher and student."*[8] A third reason, evident in 7% of all respondents, was that the respondents were unaccustomed to using this term, some indicating that they would be embarrassed because they are not used to it.

The form of address scoring highest in "Would use" was "Mr Carter". 75% of respondents' answers indicated that they might use this form of address. However, 14% of all respondents indicated that they felt that it was too formal, and another 7% stated that they did not feel accustomed to using this form of address.

No more than about half of all respondents indicated that they would use any of the three forms using the Japanese word "sensei". A total of 52% of the respondents indicated that they would use "David-sensei" and only 43% that they would use "Carter-sensei". The most frequent reason for not using these two forms of address was that it was strange to mix Japanese and English. The second most frequent reason was that it was better to use an English form of address in an English class. Other reasons included that *"It seems a little childish"* and *"It's hard to get your tongue around it"*.

An even lower percentage of respondents (39%) indicated that they would use "Sensei" on its own. Of the total number of respondents, 34% indicated that it was too impersonal, and 14% noted that it would be better to use an English term in an English class. This form of address brought the strongest negative responses. One respondent wrote, in English, *"Unbelievable.*

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[8] Although not noted in the original report, this statement came as something of a shock to me because another (unacknowledged in the original report) reason for inviting students to address me by my first name was to attempt to position myself alongside students as a friend and helper in the process of language learning. The statement quoted here in the report represents one student's refusal to accept that positioning, insisting upon a more hierarchical student–teacher relationship. The implications of this conflict in perspectives on appropriate student–teacher relationships were not examined or addressed by me in the classroom, even after this study was concluded. I continued to attempt to position myself as a friend and helper, refusing to accept the hierarchical student–teacher relationship that was expressed in this statement or even to engage the students in dialogue about it. This refusal to negotiate my positioning as friend and helper paradoxically reflects the very hierarchical relationship that I had theoretically positioned myself against. A true friend and helper would have sought to negotiate a mutually acceptable positioning. In exercising the power to control the agenda by not raising the issue with students, I was acting in the role of teacher as hierarchically superior to students. This conflict of values in terms of student–teacher relationships and the internal paradox of positioning remained completely unexamined before I engaged in the current reflexive exercise. At the present time, I consider this student's statement that "We are not friends" to be the most interesting finding of the research, and one that I wish that I had explored in more depth. I wonder why this student felt that way? I wonder if there were other students with similar feelings? I wonder how these feelings corresponded to attitudes towards language and language learning? These are all areas that I would seek to explore today.

No respect. Oh my goodness." Another wrote, also in English, *"Negative, awkward, not a good relationship."* Two respondents suggested using *"Teacher"* as an alternative.

Another significant finding was revealed when the results from one class were compared with the results from the other. As demonstrated in Figure 2 below, there was a significant difference in the results between classes. The respondents from the second year class were much more reluctant to use "David" and much more likely to use "Mr Carter". The percentages for the use of "Carter-sensei" and "Sensei" also indicated differences in attitudes between the two classes.
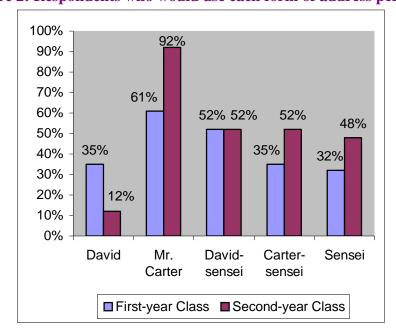
Figure 2: Respondents who would use each form of address per class

Discussion

The data suggest that there is no single answer to the question of which form of address is best to use in the English language classroom. There is no one form of address that all respondents in this survey were comfortable with. Several conclusions can be drawn from the data.

Firstly, asking this group of students to address the teacher by his or her first name alone appears to be problematic. A large percentage of students indicated that they would be uncomfortable with that form of address for social and cultural reasons, as outlined above[9].

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[9] The question remains, however, whose feelings should take priority – the students who feel uncomfortable with using the teacher's first name, or the teacher who would prefer them to use his first name? This points to important ethical questions for all research in education – namely, for whose benefit is research conducted (Ortega, 2005) and whose values, beliefs and attitudes should take priority. In the original paper, it is a question that is neither acknowledged nor addressed. The reason for this, to the best of my current understanding, was again one of expediency. This statement occurs in what I sometimes refer to as the "run-out zone" – that section towards the end of a paper in which I have run out of time, run out of ideas, run out of enthusiasm or run out of words (for papers with a limit) and therefore tend to become imprecise. If I am honestly and openly to report the findings of my research in a way that is culturally appropriate and socially just, I need to find the time, the ideas, the

Adding the Japanese suffix "sensei" may be of some help, but the percentage of students who would be comfortable with that form of address is still only just slightly over half.

Of the five options considered in this survey, using an English title with the teacher's surname appears to be the most universally acceptable form of address. However, it should be noted that still one in four students gave answers that indicated that they would not use this term. Of those who are uncomfortable with the term, more than half feel that it is too formal and unfriendly. For the teacher trying to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, this could be cause for concern.

The most significant finding from the data, however, is the large difference between the results of surveying two classes. Combined results indicate that three-quarters of the students are comfortable with using "Mr Carter". Examining the data on a class-by-class basis, however, it becomes clear that most of the second year students (92%) are comfortable with that form of address, whereas fewer that two thirds (61%) of the first-year students are. Therefore what may be acceptable to one group of students may not be to another group of students, even if they are students at the same institution[10].

This study did not investigate the reasons for the significant difference in outcomes between the two classes. Two obvious differences between the two classes are the length of time as a university student (one month versus one year) and the nature of enrolment in English class (compulsory versus elective); however, further study is necessary to investigate whether either of these factors has a significant influence on attitudes towards forms of addressing the teacher.

Conclusion

One of the key questions of this special theme issue of the *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning* relates to the assumptions, attitudes and values of researchers that may be revealed in the design and conduct of their research projects. This paper has engaged with that question by applying autoethnographic principles of reflexive analysis and self-disclosure in an attempt to explore new understandings of the self as researcher, in keeping with the postmodern research agenda. As such I present this paper as one possible model for how to engage in reflexive analysis of one's own research. As I hope that I have demonstrated in the notes above, the process requires honesty (to admit to one's own weaknesses), courage (to tackle difficult issues) and perseverance (to continue pressing for deeper and deeper understandings).

As noted in the introduction, this reflexive cycle might be continued, by reflexively examining the process of reflection, in an ever deepening spiral of self-awareness and reflection[11]. Although this paper does not engage in that level of analysis, this continuing

enthusiasm and the words to complete the report well. This is an issue of personal ethics which I hold in theory, but struggle with in practice.

[10] What remains unsaid here is the disruption to my previously held beliefs about the homogeneity of Japanese society. If Japanese students from roughly the same age group in the same faculty of the same university have such divergent views on just one issue, this metanarrative of Japanese homogeneity appears to be seriously challenged.

[11] For example, the title of this article, "Searching for Gems in the Mud", implies a structuralist epistemology, with hidden truth waiting to be discovered (Miller, Whalley, & Stronach, 2005), whereas the author, in the paragraph immediately prior to this footnote,

cycle of reflection presents itself as another interesting avenue of investigation. A reflexive process similar to that demonstrated in this paper might also be employed during the course of a research project (rather than retrospectively) in an attempt to develop a "more fluid association" (Brown & Heggs, 2005, p. 295) with participants, which in turn might open new avenues in terms of data, methods and analysis.

This cyclical potential – reflecting upon reflections upon reflections – opens up literally endless opportunities for exploration and discovery. The question facing researchers is not how deep can we go, but rather how deep do we want to go, or perhaps how deep ought we to go? This question in itself raises further ethical questions which beg reflexive interrogation: Why did I stop at this level? Whose interests are served by stopping, or by continuing, to pursue deeper levels of reflexive analysis? Where should I explore, and what should I do with what I discover? The postmodern research paradigm does not provide any answers to these questions; its focus, as demonstrated by this paper, has been to raise the profile of these previously unacknowledged and unexplored aspects of the research process.

The principal finding of this autoethnographic reflection, however, has been to document how my values and beliefs underwent such a significant change over such a relatively short period of time. This mutability of researcher beliefs and values is an area of research that I believe warrants significantly more theoretical and empirical investigation. This belief is also an issue of personal ethics for me. If I, as a researcher, am not free to accept honestly and to admit openly to changes in my values and beliefs over time, then my research threatens to become a battle to maintain a position, rather than a journey to explore new horizons. That kind of reactionary posture is one that I desire to avoid, and this paper is one mechanism by which I hope to do so.

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specifically positions his paper within the postmodern research agenda. The next level of analysis might, among other things, reflexively explore this apparent contradiction.

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