

EMPIRICAL FEATURE ARTICLE

Becoming a Feminist EFL Instructor: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Feminist Pedagogy in Japanese University EFL Classes

Reiko Yoshihara 

Nihon University, Tokyo, Japan

Correspondence: Reiko Yoshihara (yoshihara.reiko@nihon-u.ac.jp)

Received: 30 April 2025 | **Revised:** 31 July 2026 | **Accepted:** 7 August 2026

Keywords: feminist autoethnography | feminist pedagogy | higher education in Japan | post-structural feminist theory | teacher identity

ABSTRACT

Through autoethnographic narratives, this study explored how one is becoming a feminist EFL instructor in a Japanese university. The purpose of this study is to examine the complex relationship between a feminist identity and classroom practices by examining my lived experience through discussions of Japan's foreign language education policies, language interactions within academic communities, and critical self-reflexivity. For this study, feminist autoethnography was utilized as a research method. My narrative text, field notes, research memos, pre-existing documents, and other textual artifacts were collected. I employed a post-structural feminist theory of identity and scrutinized the (re)constructing process of teacher identity. Through analyzing the data, I foregrounded my lived experience of teaching gender-related topics in university EFL classes and divided my developing feminist EFL teacher identity into three parts: (1) struggles and difficulties of teaching gender topics in EFL classes, (2) “break-through” moments that helped overcome struggles and difficulties, and (3) interrogating internalized homophobia. The analysis revealed that my feminist EFL teacher identity was constituting, contesting, and evolving through the influence of sociocultural and political contexts, discursive interactions within academic communities, and critical self-reflexivity. This autoethnographic study contributes to research of teacher identity and feminist pedagogy in TESOL.

1 | Introduction

Teaching sociopolitical issues, including gender-related topics, in English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) classes is controversial in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field. Over three decades ago there was a debate on teaching sociopolitical issues in the American ESL context between Benesch (1996, 2001) and Santos (2001). This debate made me think of the responsibilities of an EFL instructor in a Japanese university. Progressive educators, including critical pedagogues, feminist teachers and global educators, have long asserted the importance of teaching sociopolitical issues and even controversial issues in ESL/EFL classes (in ESL contexts, Benesch 1996, 2001; Pennycook 1997; Vandrick 1995a, in EFL contexts, Cates 2004; Jackson and

Kennett 2024; Nagashima and Lawrence 2025; Yoshihara 2017). However, accommodationist pragmatists have criticized this teaching as indoctrination (Allison 1994; Santos 2001). Currently, neoliberalism has had a great impact on TESOL. In a neoliberal context, English language learning is regarded as a tool for employability, economic success, and global competitiveness and prioritizes instrumental skills and English certification tests over critical thinking skills and sociopolitical concerns (see Barnawi 2020; Kubota 2016; Tavares 2024).

As a feminist TESOL researcher, I have asserted that it is important for ESL/EFL teachers to teach sociopolitical issues, including gender topics, in their classes, because their job is not just to teach grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic skills, but also to promote diversity, equity, justice, peace, and freedom

with language practices (Yoshihara 2010, 2011, 2017). Teaching gender topics in ESL/EFL classes means addressing not simply gender equality on wages and laws, but also topics like violence against women, sexual harassment, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and plus (LGBTQ+) issues in ESL/EFL classes. Vandrick (1995a) noted that addressing these significant gender issues is important, because often girls and women are not taught about these issues and the possible means to defend against sexism. She also pointed out that for the same reason, it is meaningful for male students from privileged class backgrounds, immigrant and international female students with various cultural backgrounds, female students from the working class, and sexual minority students (Vandrick 1995b, 1997, 2011). By agreeing with Vandrick, I believe that teaching gender issues in ESL/EFL classes provides students with an opportunity to raise their awareness and consciousness toward gender equity and social justice.

However, I did not teach gender-related topics when I first began teaching English language in Japanese universities, because I simply assumed that a language classroom was supposed to be the place to teach grammar, vocabulary, and linguistic skills, just like I learned English in Japanese schools. When I became an EFL instructor in a Japanese university in 1995, I had no knowledge of TESOL. I was certainly not a born teacher. My journey to become a feminist EFL teacher was not straightforward. It was a long, complicated, and winding journey. In this article, I explore how I am becoming a feminist EFL university instructor by examining the dynamic and complex relationship between a feminist identity and classroom practices. I interrogate my lived experience of a university EFL instructor through discussions of foreign language education policies in Japan, aligning with economic globalization, neoliberalism, and native-speakerism. My lived experience of teacher development is also analyzed through language interactions within academic communities and critical self-reflexivity.

This project was inspired by my 2025 study (Yoshihara 2025). In that study, I investigated how gender identity influenced Japanese female EFL tenured faculty members' teaching, research, and leadership. My participants expressed very weak relationships between a gender identity and teaching choices, even though they believed in gender equity and social justice and agreed that teaching gender topics in EFL classes is important. On the contrary, I, as a feminist language teacher, strongly believe that it is important to incorporate feminist orientations into language teaching and have a strong connection between my gender identity and my teaching, research, and administrative leadership. The differences between my participants' accounts and mine inspired me to reflect on my own life, more specifically, my trajectory to become a feminist EFL teacher. More specifically, I wondered why I have such a strong aspiration to promote feminist minds in language teaching and how I am becoming a feminist language teacher. Therefore, for this study, I utilized feminist autoethnography as a research method.

Autoethnography has gained attention as an established research genre in TESOL research and practices (e.g., Canagarajah 2012; Lowe 2024; Tavares 2023; Yazan 2018). In autoethnographies, researchers write about their lived experiences, critically reflect on them, and explore the dynamic and complex relationships

between their lived experiences and sociocultural phenomena, with special attention to language learning and teaching (Yazan 2018). Feminist language researchers also draw attention to the exploration of female language teachers' lived experiences, identities-in-construction, self-reflexivities on language pedagogy, and interactions with colleagues and students by using autoethnographic approaches (Lin et al. 2004; Park 2013; Simon-Maeda 2011; Vandrick 2009). To explore the relationship between my feminist identity and classroom practices within sociocultural and political contexts, feminist autoethnography best fits my study.

I hope my study adds to and expands our knowledge of autoethnography in TESOL, highlighting a feminist language teacher's lived experience. I also hope my autoethnographic narrative resonates with readers' own similar experiences and encourages readers to implement feminist pedagogy in TESOL.

2 | EFL Contexts in Japanese Universities

The 1989 version of the Course of Study (the curriculum guidelines for foreign language teaching) issued by the Ministry of Education (now, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT) in Japan officially stated the development of communication ability and international understanding as the objectives of foreign language teaching in junior and senior high schools (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006; Lawrence 2026; Torikai 2000). Along with the policy, junior and senior high schools were required to introduce English oral communication in their curriculum (Imura 2003). English language education at the university level was not an exception in this paradigm shift. From this point onward, Japanese universities were obliged to change the language programs from a grammar-translation method to a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. Many Japanese universities began establishing courses focused on English listening and speaking and hired native English-speaking instructors to teach these courses, some of whom were often underqualified (Lowe 2024). This is in line with native-speakerism in Japanese higher education (see Lawrence 2026; Lowe 2024).

Around the same time, because of the influence of economic globalization and the advance of information technology, English played a very important role in the education system in Japan. In the late 1990s, the term "globalization" first emerged in Japanese educational policy documents and the description of Japanese higher education (Rose and McKinley 2018). The discourses of globalization, internationalization, and intercultural communication have been highlighted in foreign language education policies in Japan over the last three decades (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006; Kobayashi 2025; Kubota 2019). Having a strong association with foreign language education policies and measures, politico-economic needs, global communication, and public perceptions of English (Lin 2014), English education at the university level stressed the development of students' communication ability and advocated a CLT approach. The CLT approach reconfirmed the significance of English instruction in English language classrooms and reinforced so-called "standard" native-speaker pronunciation (Kobayashi 2025). This resulted in favorable hiring practices in Japan of white

Western men who were native English speakers (Appleby 2014; Kobayashi 2025). In 2003, the national plan to “cultivate Japanese who can use English” accelerated not only CLT but also English-medium instruction in Japanese university education (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006; Rose and McKinley 2018).

To summarize English language education in Japanese universities, even today, CLT and English-medium instruction are strongly recommended, because of economic globalization and Japan’s foreign language education policies. In addition, to ensure the quality of education advocated by MEXT, many Japanese universities introduce unified syllabi and assigned textbooks for English language courses. Under these circumstances, many universities in Japan urge EFL instructors to teach English language courses through a CLT approach with unified syllabi and assigned textbooks. This may block instructors’ innovative and progressive educational practices, including feminist pedagogy.

3 | Feminist Autoethnography

In this study, feminist autoethnography is employed as a research method to examine my own professional development as a feminist EFL teacher. Feminist autoethnography helps me explore the dynamic and complex relationship between a feminist identity and classroom practices in sociocultural, educational contexts through my personal, lived experiences in Japanese university contexts. It also allows me to contain messages in texts that promote feminist language teaching practices to challenge gender inequality and social injustice.

Feminist autoethnography should be defined as a separate research method in autoethnography research. Whereas autoethnography is a method by which researchers use themselves as the research subject and explore their own experiences as the research data in connection with sociocultural structures (Adams et al. 2015; Chang 2016), feminist autoethnography places the feminist “I” in the research and highlights how personal experiences reflect larger social and political structures (Allen and Piercy 2005; Chapola and Datta 2023; Ettorre 2017). To elaborate further, Ettorre (2017) stated:

[A]utoethnography is a feminist method: (1) autoethnography creates transitional, intermediate spaces, inhabiting the crossroads or borderlands of embodied emotions; (2) autoethnography is an active demonstration of the ‘personal is political’; (3) autoethnography is feminist critical writing which is performative, that is committed to the future of women and (4) autoethnography helps to raise oppositional consciousness by exposing precarity.

(p. 4)

Thus, feminist autoethnography researchers position themselves as feminist subjects, view the personal and the political as relational, and evoke oppositional consciousness for gender equity and justice. They uncover power inequalities that mark human relationships as well as sociocultural and political structures and

challenge normative power relations (Chapola and Datta 2023). Feminist autoethnographers also view research as a socially-just act and contain messages in texts that ask for social change (Ettorre 2017; Jones 2005). By agreeing with feminist autoethnographers, I place the “I” as a feminist in my research, examine the interconnectedness of personal experiences and larger social and cultural structures, and uncover how power influenced my experience, attitude, and behavior.

However, feminist autoethnography is exposed to criticism. Like other autoethnographic research, it is criticized for “either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful” (Ellis et al. 2011, 283; see also Casanave 2017; Ettorre 2017). Nevertheless, like many other autoethnographers, feminist autoethnographers view autoethnography as “merging art and science” (Ettorre 2017, 15) and perceive that the research can be theoretical, analytical, emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena through multiple self-reflexivity, personal knowledge, and a sense of esthetics (Ellis et al. 2011; Ettorre 2017; Jones 2005). To avoid romanticizing my own actions, I engaged in critical self-reflexivity. Although I might not have been reflexive enough, I did my best to present vulnerable self in this research.

Following Chang’s (2016) autoethnographic method, I collected my narrative texts, field notes, research memos, pre-existing documents, and textual artifacts for this study. First, I continuously wrote and rewrote my personal narrative text about my trajectory to become a feminist language teacher related to my EFL teaching practices in Japanese universities from April 2023 to December 2024, which formed the basis of the story presented in this study. The original text came from my reflective journals that I have been writing from April 2023 to the present, along the lines of four key categories: becoming a feminist, becoming a feminist language teacher, becoming a feminist researcher, and becoming a female leader in higher education. Second, I examined my own articles based on my teaching practices (Yoshihara 2010, 2011) and checked my students’ comments in my previous studies. Third, to confirm Japan’s educational policies and university EFL contexts, I referred to contemporary literature and consulted my scholarly friends in my generation and colleagues from my university. As this autoethnographic study can be considered as extended research of my 2025 study (Yoshihara 2025), additional data included my field notes and research journals since January 2020.

To analyze the data, I immersed myself in my personal narrative texts, own articles, field notes, and research memos, and engaged with the iterative and reflexive process of analysis until themes organically emerged from the data. The iterative and reflexive process involved repeatedly reading and reviewing the data, clustering related categories, reviewing relationships between them, and refining themes to represent the data. To check retrospective memory, I looked back over my articles published in the past and students’ comments. By connecting the chronological events to feminist teaching practices as the overarching theme, three distinct but interconnected stages of my life history emerged: (1) struggles and difficulties of teaching gender topics in EFL classes, (2) “breakthrough” moments that helped overcome struggles and difficulties, and (3) interrogating internalized homophobia.

Since some of the events in this research occurred over 20 years ago, some of my memories might now be vague, biased, or lost, especially the specific details. However, by cross-referencing literary texts and consulting others, I hope to minimize the perils of bias. I also considered ethical concerns, particularly representation of the people around me (see Wall 2008). The identities of the people and the names of the universities in this study remained meticulously concealed, except for my own.

4 | Post-Structural Feminist Theory of Identity

For this study, I use a post-structural feminist theory of identity as a theoretical framework to explore how my feminist EFL teacher identity was constructed and re-constructed and how my feminist EFL classroom practices evolved in Japanese university contexts. Post-structural feminist theorists argue that identities are not autonomous properties or discovered attributes but constructed, maintained, and negotiated primarily in the conditions under which people speak within institutional and community contexts (see Butler 1990; Weedon 1997). In 1987, a distinguished post-structural feminist theorist, Chris Weedon, published an influential book called *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (1st Edition)* and focused on language in discourse in the examination of the relationship between the individual and the social worlds. She replaced “identity” with “subjectivity” and described subjectivity as constituted, negotiated, contested, and changing through language interactions with individuals, groups, and communities. Another frequently cited post-structural feminist theorist, Judith Butler (1990), extends Weedon’s (1997) account whereby gender is performed and constructed within discourses. Butler’s concept of performativity—for example, not “being” but “becoming” and “doing”—sheds light on identity development. Performative identity is something one is producing and evolving by repeatedly performing particular acts.

Spivak (1988), an influential post-colonial feminist theorist, critiqued Western intellectuals including Foucault and Deleuze who claim to let marginalized people (the subalterns) speak for themselves and interpret those voices. She denounced the arrogance of the intellectuals. Even though the intellectuals tried not to “represent” them, they had power and privilege to exercise it. Finally, she asked, “Can the subaltern speak?” (p. 90), which is also her essay title. Her answer is “The subaltern cannot speak” (p. 104). However, instead of giving up the argument, she suggested that the intellectuals interrogate their subjective positions and representations within discursive, institutional, and post-colonial power structures and urged them to unlearn their privilege and learning. Landry and MacLean (1996), editors of *The Spivak Reader*, explained that unlearning means “working critically back through one’s history, prejudices, and learned, but now seemingly instinctual, responses” (p. 4). That is, unlearning is that privileged intellectuals critically reflect on their own privilege, biases, and assumptions within the prevailing power structure and dominant culture.

Such constituent, shifting, and performative qualities of post-structural feminist understandings of identity have been vigorously discussed in TESOL (Barkhuizen 2017; Kayi-Aydar et al. 2026; Melo-Pfeifer and Tavares 2026). According to

Barkhuizen (2017), “LTIs [Language teacher identities] change, short-term and over time—discursively in social interaction with teacher educators, learners, teachers, administrators, and the wider community, and in material interaction with spaces, places and objects in classrooms, institutions, and online” (p. 4, [] added by the author). In other words, language teacher identity is understood as something evolving, influenced not only by race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, (dis)ability, and language ideology, but also by classrooms, workplaces, communities, and society. Furthermore, language teacher identity is influenced and developed by critical professional experiences, critical self-reflexivity of teaching practices, and interactions with colleagues and students (Melo-Pfeifer and Tavares 2026).

This kind of concept of language teacher identity helps me analyze my trajectory of becoming a feminist EFL teacher in a Japanese university within sociocultural and political contexts. Also, critical self-reflexivity—what Spivak (1988) called “unlearning”—helps me interrogate my own privilege, beliefs, assumptions, and biases created in accustomed practices and understand how they arose and became naturalized. Therefore, Part I of my narrative will be read through subjectivity under institutional constraints, Part II through performative “becoming,” and Part III through Spivakian “unlearning.”

5 | Part I: Struggles and Difficulties of Teaching Gender Topics in EFL Classes

In 1993, I returned to Japan after finishing a bachelor’s degree in international studies and a master’s degree in women’s studies in American universities. Although I wanted to teach women’s studies in a Japanese university, there were very few opportunities to teach women’s studies courses in Japan. I began teaching English in a high school, and 2 years later I became a part-time university EFL instructor with low qualifications, including no teaching experience at the university level and no publications.

One of the reasons I easily got an EFL teaching position in a university was strongly related to the paradigm shift in English education in Japan in the early 1990s. Because of the trend that highlighted communication skills and the influence of economic globalization, many Japanese universities introduced CLT in English education and required EFL teachers to instruct English language courses in English (Kobayashi 2025; Rose and McKinley 2018; Torikai 2000). Due to native-speakerism in Japanese higher education, English listening and speaking courses were often taught by native English-speaking instructors (see Lowe 2024). The fact that I had studied in the United States in officially accredited institutions and spoke fluent English undoubtedly met the Japanese universities’ needs and expectations at that time.

In 1995, I first entered a university EFL classroom with mixed feelings. Although I was told that I was lucky to have a part-time university teaching job in my late twenties, despite insufficient qualifications, I was not happy about teaching English, especially with assigned textbooks that focused on communication skills related to travel, shopping, and dining out, as well as preparation for English certification tests. Honestly, I did not know what English language teaching looked like, because I

had no knowledge of TESOL. I gradually developed an understanding of what my responsibilities as a university EFL instructor were and what I could provide students in the language classroom. I came to believe that language education is not just teaching about communication skills with superficial topics and preparing for English certification tests, but also about promoting diversity, equity, justice, peace, and freedom, along with language teaching practices.

This belief emerged from my feminist identity. Women's studies courses in graduate school opened the door to feminism for me. It taught me what to name my experiences as a woman and how to place them in social, cultural, and political contexts. I felt like I could see a light in the dark. When I was a child, my parents overprotected me while telling me that I should do this and that, because I was a girl. My mother often put me in pink clothes with lace frills and bows and praised me saying how cute I was with these clothes. However, as I was growing up and heard my parents' gendered comments, I felt something was not quite right. But at that time, I did not have words to express the feeling. It was an "a-ha" moment when I first took a women's studies course at the undergraduate level in an American university. This is no exaggeration to say that I was awakened to feminism. Before that, I prioritized harmony over expressing my opinions, even when it felt unfair and uncomfortable. Even though I saw unequal and unfair treatments against girls and women in Japan, I kind of felt that was the way it was. After I took some women's studies courses at the undergraduate level in an American university, I realized that it was unacceptable to overlook inequality and injustice. I wanted to continue to study and learn more about women's studies in graduate school in the United States. While I was in the master's degree program in women's studies, I steadily developed my feminist ideas by reading feminist theorists' literary work, such as Collins (1990), Davis (1983), Hooks (1984), Mohanty (2003), and Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983). For me, feminism means not simply to achieve women's equal political, economic, cultural, educational, personal, and social rights, but also to gain respect for diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge, and strengths, and empower all women to realize their full rights. I also respect an intersectional perspective of feminism. Intersectionality is the interplay between gender and race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age, ability/disability, religion, and other aspects. Although the word "intersectionality" might have become more common lately, the idea is not new in feminism. The multiple, diverse, contradictory, and hybrid qualities of identities have been discussed in feminist theorists' work since the 1980s (Collins 1990; Davis 1983; Hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983).

The book that particularly moved and impressed me was *Living Our Visions: Building Feminist Community* written by Hawxhurst and Morrow (1984), which was introduced in one of my women's studies courses. The authors stated that "feminism is a call to action. It can never be simply a belief system. Without action, feminism is merely empty rhetoric which cancels itself out" (p. 14). I was fascinated by the idea that feminism is a discipline of theory and activism. Feminism is not an arm-chair theory. I highly valued feminist actions as important tools for gender equity and social justice to move forward. Feminism became my philosophy and one perspective through which to view the world.

Even though I held such feminist values and perspectives, I did not incorporate my feminist beliefs into EFL classes or teach gender topics in my classes. As was expected of many EFL instructors in Japanese universities, I thought my job was to develop the practical English communication skills of Japanese university students, teach English language courses in English like a native English-speaking instructor, and help students prepare for English certification tests. Under these circumstances, I assumed that I should not bring my feminist orientations into EFL classes. I regarded a university EFL classroom as a neutral and apolitical site. This is in line with the argument of accommodation pragmatists (see Allison 1994; Santos 2001) and the neoliberal atmosphere in TESOL (see Barnawi 2020; Kubota 2016; Tavares 2024). I prioritized focusing on instrumental skills in the language classroom and fitting students into the global economy over developing students' critical thinking skills, cultural engagement, and sociopolitical concerns.

Students' needs and wants also concerned me. When I talked to students after class, some of them said that they wanted to learn English conversation, so that they were able to use it in traveling and shopping in foreign countries. Other students said that they wanted to learn English for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to have better job opportunities. When I had more interactions with students, got to know them individually, and came to understand them and their wants, I thought that they might not want to learn gender topics in EFL classes. I came to question whether my desire to teach gender-related topics in university EFL classes might be self-serving. I wondered whether my belief in the importance of incorporating feminist perspectives into language teaching might be driven more by my own perspective than by students' needs. My students' comments about English learning and my assumptions reinforced my decision to avoid teaching sociopolitical issues, including gender-related topics, in my classes.

For these reasons and concerns, I did not incorporate my feminist beliefs into my EFL teaching practices for a long time. I gradually diminished my feminist identity and separated my feminist identity from my language teacher identity. Although I identified as a feminist and strongly believed in feminist principles, my teaching focused primarily on English language skills and superficial topics such as travel, shopping, dining out, and preparation for English proficiency tests. My feminist beliefs and my teaching practices were far removed from each other. Hawxhurst and Morrow's (1984) words, "feminism is a call to action. It can never be simply a belief system" (p. 14) really hit home for me. I felt like I was torn apart. I struggled with how to balance my identities as a feminist and a language teacher, as well as how to align my feminist beliefs with my teaching practices.

6 | Part II: "Breakthrough" Moments That Helped Overcome Struggles and Difficulties

All language teachers can have "breakthrough" moments when faced with struggles and difficulties. Thanks to the environment surrounding the teaching of English in several universities where I worked as a part-time instructor, I was able to experience such "breakthrough" moments. One of my scholarly

friends invited me to a small study group in which teachers passionately discussed new teaching methods that challenge traditional language teaching and promote diversity, equity, justice, peace, and freedom in EFL classes. I also communicated with several progressive, humanistic, and critical pedagogical EFL instructors in universities. Through interacting with these liberal, intellectual EFL teachers and attending progressive study groups, I was inspired and encouraged to incorporate gender and other sociopolitical topics into my EFL classes.

Around the same time, my curiosity about the TESOL field deepened and made me think of studying TESOL in an official way. I entered the master's degree program in an American university located in Japan. At that time, I was very skeptical of TESOL as a discipline, because I thought TESOL was simply about how to teach English. However, one course I took at the graduate level in 2004, on the topic of controversies in second language education was eye-opening for me. I found TESOL to be a much broader, deeper, and thought-provoking study than I had imagined. I also discovered that there were controversial debates on teaching sociopolitical issues, involving gender-related issues, in the TESOL field (see Benesch 1996, 2001; Santos 2001). The professor who taught the course provided us with plenty of supplementary articles about controversial debates between critical pedagogues and accommodationists in TESOL. I excitedly went to see her after class, because I wanted to know more about critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy in TESOL. She introduced me to work of Stephanie Vandrick who is one of the well-known feminist TESOL scholars. I remembered the excitement I felt when I first read one of her articles. Vandrick (1995a) asserted that ESL/EFL teachers should teach not only about safe gender issues, such as equal wages and legal rights, but also about controversial gender issues, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and LGBTQ+ issues, because often women are not taught these controversial gender issues or how to fight sexism. She concluded that this kind of teaching should not be criticized as indoctrination and that one of a language teacher's responsibilities is to help students raise their consciousness about issues of justice to end sexism. Her argument was something I had long been harboring in my mind. Vandrick's work inspired me to teach gender topics in my EFL classes. I started to include gender-related topics, such as gender stereotypes, language and gender, separate surnames in marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment, lookism, and eating disorder, in my classes. It was almost 10 years since I began teaching English in a university. I felt like I had come back to life, because my feminist belief could coincide with my classroom practice. My feminist teacher identity was constituted, contested, and evolved through interacting with liberal and progressive language teachers, TESOL academics, and feminist and critical TESOL pedagogues' artifacts. This phenomenon was reconfirmed by the constructing and re-constructing qualities of post-structural feminist understandings of identity (Weedon 1997).

Fortunately, in 2005, I obtained a tenured position in a Japanese private university and started to teach English to business majors. The English curriculum surprised me, because it was "anything goes". Different from my previous teaching experience as a part-time EFL instructor in several universities in Japan, in this college, instructors, including tenured and part-time EFL instructors, made their own syllabus and chose the

textbook that they liked. Except for the course titles, such as English Literature, English Grammar, English Writing, Oral Communication, and so on, none of the courses in the English program had specific goals and objectives. The administrative leaders and EFL tenured faculty members seemed to ignore foreign language education policies promoted by MEXT and the trend of globalization and internationalization in Japanese higher education. However, I was happy to create my own syllabus and use the materials that I liked without being dictated to in terms of a set syllabus. Therefore, in my English Writing class, I was pleased to create my own materials regarding six topics, involving English learning, domestic violence, global warming, gay/lesbian issues, the rights of the child, and corporate social responsibility, and I taught these topics in theme-based language instruction. Although the topics, except corporate social responsibility, were far away from my students' major (business), I believed that teaching sociopolitical issues, including gender-related topics, was important for students, even business majors, in order to become socially responsible world citizens.

However, when I argued in conference presentations that we should include not merely gender equality on wages and laws but also violence against women, sexual harassment, and LGBTQ+ issues, I sometimes encountered hesitation and resistance from the audience. Even accusations of indoctrination or brainwashing were leveled against feminist or pro-feminist language teachers, including myself. However, I had a hunch that students were interested in gender-related topics. Students often commented, "It was good to learn about these women's issues in this class." and "I was very glad to learn this issue [domestic violence], because I could have a chance to think deeply about this issue which I had not ever considered" (see Yoshihara 2010, 2011). Several students noted that the topic [domestic violence] was not discussed in high school textbooks and was really new to them, so that they were fascinated to learn about it and this topic raised their gender awareness. Some of them also thanked me for bringing gender-related topics into the EFL classroom. I do not think they were flattering me. In similar circumstances, I wondered how university EFL instructors felt about teaching gender-related topics in their classrooms. So, I conducted research and I found that students had positive feelings toward learning domestic violence and LGBTQ+ issues, whereas university instructors were sometimes hesitant or disliked teaching these issues (Yoshihara 2011). Several instructors obstinately insisted that English teaching should be teaching the language itself and improving students' English language abilities, not be what they saw as imposing instructors' political perspectives. Some of them honestly expressed a lack of confidence or anxiety about discussing gender-related issues in their classrooms.

Because of the findings of this study (Yoshihara 2011), I was more curious about university EFL instructors who hesitate to teach gender-related topics and wanted to conduct a doctoral dissertation project with the research question of "Why do university EFL instructors hesitate to teach gender-related topics?" However, my doctoral advisor suggested that why-questions would not work for a dissertation and in addition to this, but more importantly, that an accusing stance should be avoided. Until then, I had not noticed that asking EFL teachers why they hesitate to teach gender-related topics might sound like an accusation and put them in a defensive and vulnerable position. I was

shocked to know that I might have hurt research participants because of my strong feminist beliefs. This made me think more deeply of feminist research ethics. To avoid hurting and offending participants, feminist researchers should critically reflect on themselves and must be sensitive to their power and privilege. As Leavy and Harris (2019) noted, critical self-reflexivity makes us aware of differences between researchers and participants and how differences in status and experiences influenced research projects (see also, Spivak 1988). At that time, I was very naïve about my own power and privilege.

During my doctoral studies, my advisor guided me to think of *how*-questions, not *why*-questions. It took a while, though I finally found the dissertation theme on self-identified feminist EFL university instructors' life histories, beliefs, and classroom practices. While I was interviewing my participants and proceeding with my doctoral dissertation project, I found that the feminist EFL instructors taught English in various ways according to their feminist perspectives (Yoshihara 2014). Not only did they teach gender topics in a straightforward way, but they also incorporated feminist perspectives into their EFL classes. For example, they gave equal attention, even special attention, to female students, used gender-neutral language, used group techniques for gender awareness, incorporated women's stories into writing techniques, brought in videos about girls and women, reclaimed local women's issues, and introduced gender-related events. This doctoral dissertation project taught me that feminist pedagogy is not simply teaching gender-related issues in a direct way but also teaching feminist thinking in many diverse ways (Schenke 1996; Vandrick 1994). After finishing the doctoral dissertation, I felt sufficiently relaxed to further incorporate my feminist perspectives into the EFL classes that I teach.

Thus, while I was teaching gender-related topics, researching feminist teaching in Japanese university EFL classes, and conducting a doctoral dissertation project and interviewing feminist EFL instructors in Japanese universities, I was becoming a feminist EFL teacher and researcher. This is the performative "becoming" qualities of identity advocated by Butler (1990).

7 | Part III: Interrogating Internalized Homophobia

Although I believed that it is important to teach not only gender issues but also LGBTQ+ issues in ESL/EFL classes, I felt uneasy teaching LGBTQ+ topics in my classroom. I worried that it might be inappropriate for me to teach LGBTQ+ issues, because I am not a member of the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand, I believed in the importance of an educational curriculum that includes LGBTQ+ issues. I wanted to be an ally of LGBTQ+ people and wanted heterosexual students to know and understand LGBTQ+ issues through language practices.

With these struggles in mind, I was teaching gay/lesbian topics in my English Writing classes (see Yoshihara 2011). But I honestly confess that my classroom practice was very superficial. What I did in my classes was to show the notable film *Philadelphia* and have students write a movie review, involving the plot and their thoughts, in English. In the classroom, I did not use group work or class discussions that I usually do when I

teach other topics, nor did I ask students to do peer reading that I usually ask students to do when they write a first draft. During class, I often commented how gay people are normal, by saying "I have gay and lesbian friends. They are just like normal people." I also represented myself as a heterosexual teacher in the class by saying, "I'm not lesbian, but..."

My attitude and classroom practice toward teaching gay/lesbian issues in my classes were very problematic in many ways. To begin with, I attempted to make gay/lesbian people normal by saying "They are just like normal people," which Goffman (1963) calls "normalizing" (Goffman 1963, cited in Nelson 2009, 117). By asserting that gay/lesbian people are basically the same as heterosexual people, I unconsciously compelled gay/lesbian people to assimilate to the heteronormative community and thereby reinforced heterosexism. Then, I offered myself as a heterosexual teacher in the classroom by saying, "I'm not lesbian, but..." Simultaneously, I often explained in my classroom that my motive for teaching gay/lesbian themes was related to human rights issues and the issues of equality and justice. Behind the scenes of claiming my sexuality, I feared being seen or suspected as a lesbian in the homophobic and heteronormative atmosphere prevailing in Japan (see Simon-Maeda 2004). Although I did not notice it myself, I had internalized homophobia. At last, I did not use group work, class discussions, or peer reading that I usually do in my classroom, because I was worried about unexpected consequences. There might be LGBTQ+ students in my classroom who might have more knowledge, information, and resources and make more intellectual comments. They might think of me as an unknowledgeable person and a hypocrite. I fell into essentialism by framing LGBTQ+ students as authentic "insiders" and myself as an "outsider" (see Nelson 2009, 113). I was so upset that I could not breathe, when I realized my own homophobic and heterosexist attitudes and behaviors.

However, one of my scholarly friends encouraged me to continue teaching gay/lesbian issues while reconsidering problematic issues in my classroom practices. She convinced me that gay/lesbian teachers take greater risks than heterosexual teachers when they teach gay/lesbian issues. Gay/Lesbian teachers might be fearful of losing their job, particularly when they are part-time instructors. She assured me that I have a very low risk if I teach gay/lesbian topics in my classes because I am heterosexual. Personal communications with her encouraged me to incorporate gay/lesbian topics into my EFL classes and made me think of heterosexual feminist teachers' responsibilities. Also, Vandrick (2009) described exactly the dilemma I felt about teaching LGBTQ+ issues and persuaded me to speak "out for" LGBTQ+ students and colleagues. Speaking "out for," as opposed to speaking "for," means that "one can advocate for equal rights and justice for groups that are not currently receiving those rights and that justice" (Vandrick 2009, 113).

Through language interactions with scholarly friends and academic artifacts, I reflected on my classroom practice based on my beliefs, biased reasoning, defensive attitudes, and taken-for-granted assumptions. It required time to unlearn my own perceived privilege of being a heterosexual teacher and to unlearn the learning that underpins my biased thinking (see Spivak 1988; Landry and MacLean 1996). The "unlearning" process was uncomfortably reflective, deeply emotional, and

painful, because I uncovered my own homophobia, stereotypes, prejudice, and biases. I felt powerless and vulnerable. I lost my confidence in teaching LGBTQ+ topics. It also made me wonder who was adequate to teach LGBTQ+ topics. My experience aligned with Tavares' (2023) experience of identity tension and dissonance caused by language ideologies. By reflecting on his experiences of teaching Portuguese as a foreign language in Canada, Tavares, as a plurilingual, transnational L2 teacher, raised questions about who should teach what in language classes, who counts as a "legitimate" teacher, and how teachers remain in the profession despite language ideological challenges manifested in students' stereotypes, expectations, and behaviors. He concluded that a teacher's legitimacy hinged on earning the trust and acceptance of their students rather than on their knowledge of the subject matter or teaching skills.

Although I have not had a chance to teach LGBTQ+ issues in my classes since then, because of the curriculum reform, this made me think of my imagined future practice. First of all, in homophobic and heteronormative Japanese university contexts, I should stop saying "They are just like normal people" and "I'm not lesbian, but..." Nelson (2009) suggested that it would not be necessary to state whether teachers come out as gay or straight but rather to show how teachers challenge homophobia and heteronormativity. This made me realized that it is unnecessary to state my own sexuality not only in my classroom but also in everyday life. Second, I should use group work and class discussions, as I usually do in my classes. If unexpected questions emerged from students, I would honestly say, "I don't know." If students made homophobic and unacceptable comments, I would simply say, "I don't think so," and then ask the class, "But how is this idea produced in our society?" If teachers say, "I don't know," doubts and puzzles might bubble up within students. However, I think open and honest communication can build a trusting relationship between teachers and students and provide a safe learning environment. Finally, I would encourage students to examine their own biases and assumptions through language interactions. Because the "unlearning" process applies not only to privileged intellectuals but also students from privileged class backgrounds, it helps the students critically reflect on their power, privilege, and prejudices, and can lead to their own personal growth. This self-awareness makes a difference not just in the classroom but also outside the classroom.

8 | Conclusion

This study set out to provide insights into the question: How am I becoming a feminist EFL instructor in a Japanese university? My autoethnographic narrative indicates that a feminist EFL teacher identity is not rigid, stable or unified, but rather has been constituted, contested, and evolved through the influence of sociocultural and political contexts, interactions with others, academic communities, and textual artifacts, and critical self-reflexivity of "learning" and "unlearning" processes.

My autoethnographic narrative has uncovered how larger social contexts strongly impacted one feminist EFL instructor's classroom practice in higher education. This evidenced that the 1990s' paradigm shift of foreign language education policies in Japan, often aligning with economic globalization, neoliberalism, and

native-speakerism, influenced not just English curriculum in Japanese universities but also what EFL teachers in Japan thought and believed and how they actually taught English. Feminist and critical ESL/EFL pedagogues are often assumed to teach English according to their philosophical principles. However, foreign language education policies and politico-economic needs have an effect on their teacher beliefs and produce gaps between their teacher beliefs and classroom practices (see Kleinsasser 1993). Teaching is inevitably political, and teaching cannot be value-free (Benesch 2001; Pennycook 1997; Vandrick 1995a).

My autoethnographic narrative has also opened up the view of teacher identity as evolving, shifting, and performative (Butler 1990; Weedon 1997). Although I had not incorporated my feminist beliefs into my language classroom for many years, I was gradually changing and developing my feminist EFL teacher identity through discursively interacting with progressive language teachers, participating in academic communities, and engaging with academic artifacts. In particular, repeatedly performing particular acts, such as actually teaching gender-related topics in EFL classes and conducting research on feminist teaching, led me to "becoming" a feminist EFL teacher. This suggests that one is not "being" a feminist EFL teacher but "becoming" a feminist EFL teacher (Butler 1990).

Last but not least, this study reminded me that critical self-reflexivity is extremely pivotal for teacher development. Whenever I faced struggles and difficulties in teaching, there were "unlearning" moments (see Spivak 1988; Landry and MacLean 1996). While being reflexive of teaching gay/lesbian topics in my EFL class, I realized that I had internalized homophobia and heteronormativity. Although it took a long time to unlearn my own privilege, assumption, and classroom practices that underpinned my own bias, critical self-reflexivity led me to teacher development and even personal growth. This "unlearning" process could apply to all academics in every field.

Thus, feminist autoethnography, like other autoethnography, contributes to teacher development and more ethical practices through critical self-reflexivity of teachers' own identities, beliefs, biases, assumptions, and positionalities within sociocultural and educational contexts. I, as a feminist TESOL researcher, encourage feminist ESL/EFL researchers to engage in feminist autoethnography and document the challenges they face regarding feminist identity issues, teaching practices, and methodological research concerns. Although conducting feminist autoethnography can often involve uncomfortable emotional experiences, this leads to professional development and contributes to teacher identity research. And, as an advocate of feminist pedagogy in TESOL, I hope my feminist autoethnographic narrative inspires ESL/EFL teachers who are interested in feminist pedagogy but are struggling to incorporate feminist minds into their classrooms to engage in feminist teaching for gender equity and social justice. Feminist pedagogy is more than just an idea; it's an actual teaching practice that reflects a teacher's feminist mind.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Stephanie Vandrick for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and in particular Sarah Holland for

continually reading and commenting on this paper. My sincere gratitude also goes to anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions.

Funding

No funding was received for conducting this study.

Disclosure

No AI tools were used in the production of this paper.

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was not required for this study.

Consent

No applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest was reported by the author.

Data Availability Statement

The data that has been used in this study is confidential.

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