Learning Histories to YouTube: Learners' Lives as Curriculum

TIM MURPHEY
Kanda University of International Studies

The article describes the agentive development of a group of first-year Japanese university students. They first individually wrote their language learning histories to grasp what they had been through in their junior and senior high school English education. They then analyzed the histories in small groups, discussing what motivated and demotivated each person, what students and teachers might learn from their experiences, and what the Ministry of Education (Monbusho) might do to support their learning more. The small groups wrote reports and sent their findings to the Ministry of Education at the end of the year along with a 3-min YouTube video of the major findings. Their reports concluded that Japanese students endure too much test-focused grammar and lectures in their junior and senior high school education and would prefer to learn more from a more orally interactive curriculum with complementary teaching methods. This agency-inviting process that the students progressed through is similar to Weinstein's (2006) conception of "learners' lives as curriculum," echoing Freire's (1970) and Dewey's (1938/1963) participatory and experiential learning and community involvement, which invites and encourages more agency from students.
doi: 10.1002/tesj.79

[Student Action Log comment] I never thought that we would make a video on YouTube. It's just GREAT! I was questioning how we learn English from middle school. I didn't like the way we learn English at JHS and HS in Japan. So I could understand [how] people who don't like English feel. Our project, it could be just small steps to change MEXT [the Ministry of Education]! But a lot of small steps come together to be big steps to make change in Japan. Just watching and doing nothing, it won't change

anything. If we want to change something, we have to make first small steps.

Freire 's (1970) and Dewey's (1938/1963) critical, participatory, and experiential learning and community involvement of education in real life has inspired me to invite my students to write about their language learning histories (LLHs) for many years (Murphey, 1997). In 2009, through writing their own LLHs, and then analyzing them and writing reports about them, they gained insight about what might be wrong with education and how it might be improved. By letting them know at the beginning of the analysis that I would send the reports to the Ministry of Education in Japan, they took on the task with more energy and responsibility, and a sense of agency. Then, we dared to make a YouTube video condensing the essence of their message to just a few minutes, provoking an even greater sense of agency.

In language learning, Candlin and Sarangi (2004, p. xiii) conceptualized agency as "the self-conscious reflexive actions of human beings," thus suggesting that one exercises agency by taking conscious and purposeful action. Lantolf and his colleagues suggest something similar when they propose that agency includes "voluntary control over behavior" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 142). It also includes "the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 143), and, because it is necessarily realized in a context with others, it is "socioculturally mediated and dialectically enacted" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 238). It is, at once, "unique to individuals and co-constructed" (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148), but

> never a "property" of a particular individual; rather, it is a relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large. (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 148)

The agency these students displayed was indeed co-constructed by group members, with the help of the Web 2.0 tool YouTube. And what many of the comments at the bottom of the *Real Voice* YouTube video are showing us is that agency can also be contagious and modeled.

LANGUAGE LEARNING HISTORIES

Language learning histories (LLHs) have at least a 15-year-old history of research in TESOL (Murphey, 1997; Oxford, 1996), and they have been shown to be beneficial for students to read and reflect on (Murphey, 1999). Thirty students in my first-year university English Department seminar wrote their LLHs in the spring of 2009, their first semester in a Japanese university. They read a few LLHs by my previous students that I had collected as class publications (Murphey, 1999) to get a feel for the story telling. (For an extensive database of LLHs, see Vera Menezes's site: http://www.veramenezes.com/narrativas.htm.) Then each wrote their own LLH choosing to answer some question-prompts or not (see Appendix A). I printed these up and made them into booklets to give to students on the last day of class.

ANALYZING LLHS

Phil Race writes (cited by Hinett, n.d.): "The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning to the wider perspective of learning—heading towards seeing the bigger picture." In the fall of 2009, during the second semester, students formed groups of three or four to reflect on and analyze the LLHs over a period of three or four weeks and to write reports about their findings. This was a form of critical participatory looping (CPL; Murphey & Falout, 2010); that is, in giving the histories back to the students to analyze and reflect upon, I was asking the students to participate in research about themselves and looping their assignments back to them for analysis (see Appendix B). I had also told them that I planned to mail a copy of the results to the Ministry of Education, which seemed to help many of them take it more seriously and see that perhaps their work might have an impact on government policy. After students revised their reports several times, I assembled all the reports into a booklet, doing a quick computer spell check and grammar check with an occasional edit of an odd phrase. Fellow teachers Maria Trovela and Joe Falout also did some proof reading

and gave feedback on the collection. The collection is called *Real Voice*, a title suggested by one of the students (Real Voice, 2010a).

THE MAKING OF THE VIDEO

Having seen the *Charter for Compassion* YouTube video (2009) and being intrigued with the way people were only saying a few words at a time, and the fast-changing visuals, I thought we might be able to model it with a summary of the student results from their reports. So I wrote up a script summarizing the findings (Appendix C) and spent part of one class near the end of the semester filming students performing the script once or twice in groups of five or six, with each student saying every fifth or sixth line.

This activity in itself was a great exercise, as they had to keep a chunk of English in short-term memory long enough to look at the camera and speak meaningfully to the "audience." It turned out so well that I repeated the activity with another class and they too responded with great feedback in their action logs (Murphey, 1993). Several students commented on the script, and improvements were incorporated (Appendix C). Finally, volunteers came for the official filming of the script during their free time and were asked to sign consent forms. I also invited several students from the other class who had practiced with the script, to add some diversity into the mix of students.

Along with a recently graduated student cinéaste, Yuichi Suga, I filmed the students and Yuichi mixed a version on his Mac. He showed me the first edit and we decided that adding subtitles would be a good idea and we changed a few clips to make it more comprehensible. Yuichi also added some noncommercial background music to the second version, and I posted it on YouTube a few weeks after the initial filming on January 20, 2010 (Real Voice, 2010b).

VIDEO RECEPTION

"Mash Collaboration," an online aggregator of examples of student voice for the English language teacher (ELT) site ELTNEWS.com, featured the video with a link and a review, and also created a link for downloadable student reports a few days later. Several other colleagues in and out of Japan embedded the

link on their websites, Facebook pages, and blogs. During the first 10 days of the initial posting of the video on January 20, 2010, almost 1,000 views were recorded, with half from international audiences. The interest from far and wide provided evidence that the main message from students (that they wanted less testing and grammar, and more *using* and learning the language) struck home with many people, as quotes from the YouTube comment function attest:

I am going to show the video to my ELT methodology class next term. (University of Seville)

Lovely project with a clear message that language students from all over the world will recognise. (England)

I am a high school English teacher in Tokyo, and I am going to show your video to some of my students. . . . I'm sure that many of them share your opinions. (Tokyo, Japan)

I loved the video and think it's a very important contribution to all non-native countries where teachers sometimes focus more on the product and less on the process. Less testing/grammar and more practice of the language would really help. . . . (Mexico)

Thanks for daring to be the change!!! This is the way to go—to spread your voices so that the world can hear your desires, possible and future selves. (Brazil)

Moreover, many viewers were impressed that students would dare to make such a video in the first place, as their teacher was impressed:

So powerful hearing this message from the people who have suffered most from the status quo. Great idea. Let's have more of this.

omg, thank you thank you thank you~ brave students. we teachers need to listen up, and do what we can, when we can! thinking about the coming school year's lesson plans now~ what a great time to see this and remember to keep them in mind, at all times. . . .

Coming from students themselves makes the call more compelling. Students—take this mission with you when you graduate; continue to push for these changes as teachers, parents, and members of society. (US)

POST-PROJECT REFLECTIONS

Around January 25, I mailed the booklets of the LLHs and the reports, as well as the YouTube Link, to three Japanese national newspapers and the Ministry of Education. As of this writing, there is no news, but as my students say in the video, sound-biting Michael Jordan, "We can accept failure, but we cannot accept not trying." After 38 months (as of March 31, 2013), the video had about 616,500 views, with about 60% coming from other countries.

I have come to understand this process as similar to Weinstein's (2006) conception of "learners' lives as curriculum," echoing Freire's (1970) and Dewey's (1938/1963) theories of participatory and experiential learning and community involvement. In February and March 2010, I had the opportunity to give several talks about the importance of student agency and to show the video to teacher groups and universities in Hawai'i, California, Alberta, Georgia, Puerto Rico, and Tampico (see Murphey, 2010, for a downloadable 11-min video presentation on "agency and student voice" from the University of Hawai'i.) At each place, audiences applauded at the end of the video and eagerly asked questions about how it was done and its history, often saying these students broke the stereotype of "the silent Asian" for them.

For teachers wishing to work along these lines with their students, I would suggest starting with a flexible timeline, letting your students know why they are doing the tasks, and what the social consequences might be, so there is more buy-in from the beginning. Creating artifacts like LLHs and report booklets and the YouTube video provides students with visual evidence of their work and their "stands." While nothing may ever change because of our activism, that is no excuse to not be active and encourage activism—we voice our opinions because that is how a more effective critically improving democratic society works. And therein lies a sense of agency, that we have acted, regardless of whether we succeed or not in visible changes.

Finally, there is a public story of harmful over-testing that lies behind my students' narratives and analyses that they bring starkly into view in the video when we see their own pleas for

change. I believe that student activism gives rise to teacher activism and may very well inspire teachers to make stands on behalf of their students (Murphey, 2004). Several high school teachers have told me that they actually cried when first seeing the video, because of the empathy they had with their students. But as one of my readers suggested, "as long as major testing and publishing conglomerates dominate the ELT field, little to no change will be seen." Elana Shohamy, a testing expert, says, "I am very interested in challenging ideology, challenging all these things we are supposed to believe. Yes, in that respect, I am an anarchist" (ELT NEWS interview; Shohamy, 2011). So maybe my students and I are anarchists as well. However, challenging the status quo, especially when it seems unproductive, inefficient, and wasteful, should be the job of every honest and caring citizen, anarchist or not. It is time for parents and teachers of good faith and clear mind to step forward and be heard, anarchist or not.

Let me end with a few student e-mail comments about the impact on them of making the video, which is by far the most gratifying part of doing the project to my mind.

I was very surprised at a lot of messages over the world. I was happy that most of them knew our REAL VOICE and agreed with us. And I hope this video will be a good opportunity to rethink about the system or guideline of English teaching. I want JHS/HS students to watch it and hope they feel something about their study. (H)

Watching Real Voice video, I'm very glad and honored to have joined this project. If I were not a student in this class, I couldn't have done such wonderful and useful activity for students who will study English in the future. (S)

THE AUTHOR

Tim Murphey is TESOL's Professional Development in Language Education series editor. He researches Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) with a transdisciplinary emphasis on community, play, and music at Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan.

REFERENCES

Candlin, C., & Sarangi, S. (2004). Preface. In A. Sealey & B. Carter, *Applied linguistics as social science*. London, England: Continuum.

Charter for Compassion. (2009, November 12). Captain & The Fox (captainandthefox.com) in partnership with WORKSHOP (workshoplovesyou.com). www.youtube.com/watch?v=wktlwCPDd94.

Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Collier. Original publication New York, NY: Macmillan, 1938.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Seabury Press.

Hinett, K. (n.d.). Improving learning through reflection. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id485_improving_learning_part_one.pdf

Lantolf, J., & Pavlenko, A. (2001). (S)econd (L)anguage (A)ctivity theory: Understanding second language learners as people. In M. P. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 141–148). Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

Lantolf, J., & Thorne, S. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Murphey, T. (1993). Why don't teachers learn what learners learn? Taking the guesswork out with action logging. *English Teaching Forum 31*(1), 6–10.

Murphey, T. (1997). *Language learning histories*. Nagoya, Japan: South Mountain University Press.

Murphey, T. (1999). Publishing students' language learning histories: For them, their peers, and their teachers. *Between the Keys*, *7*(2), 8–11, 14.

Murphey, T. (2004). Participation, (dis-)identification, and Japanese university entrance exams. *TESOL Quarterly*, *38*, 700–710. doi:10.2307/3588286.

Murphey, T. (2010). Agency and student voice. Available at: http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/

Murphey, T., & Falout, J. (2010). Critical participatory looping: Dialogic member checking with whole classes. *TESOL Quarterly*, *44*, 811–821. doi:10.5054/tq.2010.237337
Oxford, R. (1995). When emotion meets (meta)cognition in language learning histories. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *23*(7), 581–594. doi:10.1016/0883-0355(96)80438-1.
Real Voice. (2010a). Reports. Available at: http://www.eltnews.com/columns/mash/2010/01/the_real_voice_of_japanese_stu_1.html
Real Voice. (2010b). Video. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwsZ0KiHhRg
Shohamy, E. (2011). Prof. Elana Shohamy talks about the ethicality of testing. Available at: http://www.eltnews.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=388%3Aprof-elana-shohamy-talks-about-the-ethicality-of-testing&catid=2%3Ainterviews&Itemid=5
Weinstein, G. (2006). Learners' lives as curriculum. In G. H. Beckett, & P. C. Miller (Eds.) *Project-based second and foreign language education* (pp. 159–165). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

APPENDIX A

ORIGINAL INSTRUCTIONS HANDOUT (REDUCED)

My Language Learning History

> Write a paper about your language learning history from when you began learning English to the present. Length: 3 pages double spaced (about 750 words). Send it via e-mail to Tim (mits@kanda.kuis.ac.jp). Some questions you may want to answer in your story:

- How did you learn English in JHS and HS?
- What positive and negative experiences did you have and what did you learn from them?
- What were you expecting before you came to the university?
- What were you surprised about in your university classes?
- How have you changed your ways of language learning since coming to the university?
- What are the things that you found especially helpful?
- What are the areas that you still want to improve in?

- How do you think your next three years will be?
- What are your language learning plans and goals after graduation?
- What advice would you give to next year's first-year students?

Have your paper proofread and signed by two other classmates. Write the following at the end of your paper for their signatures: "I have proofread and given suggestions about this paper." Signed _____ Signed _____

APPENDIX B

STUDENT REPORTS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN JAPAN BASED ON LLHS

(To be made into a book) Need a better title. Any ideas?_____
Group # _____ Report DEADLINE next WEDNESDAY Nov 11 MIDNIGHT
Members: _____
About important points you found in your research.
Creative title to your report: _____

Parts to write	Person in charge	To send to composer by
Intro	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Method (what, why, who, how)	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Motivational factors	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Demotivational factors	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Recommendations to students	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Recommendations to teachers	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Recommendations to MEXT	_____	Monday: Time: _____
Surprising data. Conclusion	_____	Monday: Time: _____

You can meet and compose together and /or

Send your paragraphs to a final composer who puts all the pieces together and smooths them out. Final composer is responsible for final spell checker and grammar and clean copy. The composer should have less to actually do in the above composing since they will be working hard to get the final draft in. Final composer may send the final copy around for member comments on Tuesday before turning it in/ or sending it in on Wed.

Final composer is_____

The composer must give or send a copy to Tim by next Wednesday night or drop it off in their action log. Composer also turns in this piece of paper with the report. Make sure group members have each other's emails and phone numbers. When sending things around, cc all your members even if you are only talking to one, it is common courtesy to other members.

Notes:

APPENDIX C

THE REAL VOICE OF JAPANESE STUDENTS 2010—UNIVERSITY STUDENT COMMENTS ON THEIR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN JHS AND HS

(Video script read on December 21, 2009, for a YouTube Video by students)

1. Our Language Learning Histories
2. And our research / show that
3. Learning English in Japan / is not always easy
4. Many JHS / and HS students in Japan
5. Study mainly grammar / for entrance exams
6. And end up / not being able / to use English
7. After *many* years of study.
8. This is the inconvenient truth: / *Honne not Tataemae*
9. While most JHS and HS teachers mean well
10. And some of our teachers have been really great!
11. The truth is, many teachers are force-feeding grammar
12. This IS the inconvenient truth: / *Honne not Tataemae*
13. A bit of grammar,
14. At the point of need,
15. Can be useful
16. But too much, is too much!
17. Its BORRRRR ING (say slowly)
18. We want to TALK more (excited)
19. Use English!
20. Talk to our classmates
21. SING SONGS! (Everybody sing it!)
22. Give presentations
23. Write our own ideas
24. Think seriously

25. about improving our world
26. In short . . .
27. Do things with the language
28. Not just listen to teachers . . .
29. Talk in Japanese
30. When students speak English
31. We still use grammar / like now
32. We learn vocabulary
33. In language learning
34. You "use it or lose it."
35. *Narau yori nareyo*
36. Asking may be a moment's embarrassment
37. Not asking is a lifelong regret.
38. *Kiku wa itoki no hadji, kikanu wa isho no hadji.*
39. We ASK for CHANGE
40. In English education in Japan
41. For future generations
42. Students want to USE English
43. Less testing and grammar
44. We think our teachers need a break
45. from teaching to exams
46. We think Mombusho could help
47. By changing the exam system
48. Our exams are literally killing some of us
49. You know, this may not work . . .
50. It's OK, / "We can accept failure,
51. but we cannot accept not trying"
52. We dare / to hope for change
53. Thanks for at least trying
54. To improve education
55. For future generations
56. *Arrigato gozaimas*