

Sexual Harassment: A Critical Issue for EFL in Japan

Robert O'Mochain
Ritsumeikan University

Since the end of 2017, many controversies and social media campaigns, especially the “#MeToo” movement, have kept the issue of sexual harassment in the public eye. While the #MeToo movement has impacted many in the United States and elsewhere, its impact in Japan has been considerably less. This is surprising as sexual harassment inflicts very negative effects on victims and the problem is prevalent in many social spheres in Japan, including in educational institutions. This article outlines the extent of the problem and provides suggestions on classroom activities and educational initiatives to raise awareness for the transformation of currently toxic conditions.

2017年末から、多くの論争やソーシャルメディアによるキャンペーン、特に「#MeToo」運動により、セクシャルハラスメント問題に世間の関心が向けられている。「#MeToo」運動は米国などで影響を与えた一方、日本での影響は少なかつた。これは驚くべきことである。何故なら、セクシャルハラスメントはその犠牲者に多大な否定的影響を与えるものであり、日本においても教育機関を含め多くの公共の場で蔓延しているからである。本論ではこの問題の広がりについて概要を述べ、現在の弊害を変えるための意識を高める、教室でできるアクティビティおよび教育主導に関する提議を行う。

In the early 1970s, around a number of US university campuses, such as MIT and Cornell, groups of activist women began to recognize, name, and analyze a social problem that had long gone unnamed and unchallenged: sexual harassment (Seagrave, 1994). They shared their stories, recognized patterns and commonalities, and identified two main types of harassment: “quid pro quo,” when an employer or work colleague demands sexual favors for work benefits, promotion, or being spared dismissal; and a “hostile work environment”, when colleagues habitually do physical, verbal, or non-verbal acts of a sexual nature that other employees find offensive (McKinnon, 1979). Sexual harassment also came to denote situations outside of the workplace. For example, when classmates stigmatize their peers as sexually promiscuous or engage in homophobic bullying, this can be seen as a type of sexual harassment, as it draws on social prejudice and affects our individual sense of sexual identity. Sexual harassment can also occur between people who are in intimate relationships. In Japan this is referred to as “Dating Violence”

and is a phenomenon that affects large numbers of students (*Mainichi Japan*, 2016). In addition, “street sexual harassment” usually occurs when men believe they have impunity to do a range of inappropriate acts, such as shouting out offensive comments or epithets on the street, groping women on crowded trains or buses, or “upskirting” (taking photos of a person’s lower body without his or her consent) on escalators and stairs. All of these offensive behaviors receive varying degrees of social approbation, in spite of the deleterious effects on the psychological well-being of victims.

Negative Effects

A recent *Mainichi Shimbun* news article (Miura, 2017) details the story of Ninomiya Saori, who experienced sexual harassment from her boss 20 years ago and even today still suffers from a stress disorder due to the long-term effects of the abuse. She works in programs to reduce incidents of sexual assault in Japan but feels that society still tends to lay blame and shame at the door of the victims much more than that of the perpetrators. Negative effects on students are also an issue for concern. In their research into the effects of sexual harassment on junior high school students in the U.S., Gruber and Fineran (2016, p. 112) argue that sexual harassment “activates sexist and heterosexist stereotypes, erodes school engagement, alienates students from teachers, and adversely affects academic achievement, to a greater degree than bullying does.” This realization lies behind recent research initiatives in east Asia, such as the study by Yuan-Shan, Dih-ling, Hung-Shen, and Bai-Syuan (2012) in high schools in Taiwan. They found that over half of junior high school students had experienced sexual harassment within the previous year and that this was a source of psychological distress.

Extent of the Problem

Over the past 30 years, many laws have criminalized workplace sexual harassment and employers who do nothing to prevent sexual harassment. Between 1974 and 2010 in the U.S., law courts heard ten

different cases that tightened federal law provisions against workplace sexual harassment (Conte, 2010). In addition, two civil rights acts and equal employment opportunity laws improved the situation during the 1980s and 1990s. While positive legal developments also occurred in Japan from the mid-1980s onwards, they were not as extensive as in the United States. The doubtful efficacy of provisions made during this period can be discerned from the fact that 9,500 people filed cases with the Japanese Ministry of Labor in 2000 (Huen, 2007). In a recent government survey, 30% of employees in Japan reported being sexually harassed at work (*Japan Times*, 2017). Justice Ministry figures estimate that only 18% of cases of sexual harassment actually get reported to police (Yamasaki, 2017).

Research data for educational institutions are also a cause for concern. A 2016 survey by Japan's Education Ministry reported that 129 teachers had to be dismissed from public schools due to sexual assault (*The Japan Times*, 2017). In total, 226 school staff members were found culpable of offences including secret filming or peeping, touching of a victim's body, and sexual intercourse. A General Union (2014) survey found that 57% of female instructors in Japan, as well as 48% of men had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. Other findings from the survey were equally worrying. Appropriate action was taken against culprits in only 15% of cases and many respondents did not feel confident enough in the institutional system to report the incidents. Many who did report sexual misconduct found there were no procedures in place for them to pursue justice and to prevent perpetrators from re-offending. In fact, representatives at lower-management level usually discouraged victims from taking any further steps to deal with the situation. The survey also indicated that sexual harassment occurs in a wide range of educational institutions, from the largest to the smallest, and that many instructors feel unsafe in their work environment. Accounts of the language conversation school GABA (General Union, 2017) also indicate that language instructors in the *eikaiwa* (English language conversation school) sector may be vulnerable to sexual harassment. The principal causal factors may include short-term contracts, immigration status, language ability issues, cross-cultural miscommunication, and a lack of managerial support (cf. Currie-Robson, 2014). More empirical research needs to be done in Japan to determine the extent to which sexual harassment is happening in conversation schools and in other educational institutions.

Social Norms and Educational Institutions

Recent studies in Japan have focused on social and cultural factors that hinder anti-harassment initiatives. In a review of measures against workplace sexual harassment in Japan, Huen (2007, p. 826) argues that the reason why this problem is so extensive in workplaces in Japan is due to societal attitudes of acceptance, with unhelpful gender stereotypes that construct sexual harassment as part of a "normal" workplace. In her analysis of sexual harassment in Japanese culture, Kazue (2008, p. 57) argues that deep-rooted cultural values of *wa* (social harmony) and respect for fatherly authority often constrain institutions from initiating effective measures to protect individuals.

Each social institution has its own culture of gender relations, and this is often embodied in a culture of silence regarding sexual harassment (Seagrave, 1994, p. 5). Educational institutions are not exceptional in regard to cultures of silence surrounding sexual harassment, and this also applies in the field of language education (Waldron, 2017). Teachers and researchers can be targeted in diverse locales, including conference sites. In her review of sexual harassment at conferences in the ELT industry, Unlu (2017) reflects on widespread concerns about unwritten codes of negative values and further suggests that perpetrators often take advantage of circumstances at conferences to carry out abusive behavior. Physical proximity overnight in hotels is an obvious factor, but another factor regards the power relations of people involved. In some cases, senior academics who play a pivotal role in the awarding of masters and doctoral degrees to young graduate students see conferences as opportunities to carry out abusive behaviors. Concern for the well-being of language practitioners at conferences lie behind recent initiatives within JALT, which now has a code of conduct to deal with harassment at conferences (JALT, 2018) and is currently working on more online resources.

Author's Classroom Activities

Engagement with the difficult issues raised by sexual harassment should be seen as a vital concern for all language educators who share a commitment to critical applied linguistics and its "broader political and ethical visions that put inequality, oppression, and compassion to the fore" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 10). This ethical imperative motivates me to do what I can as an educator to challenge a disturbing social malaise. I have had positive experiences in my own efforts to challenge the culture of silence surrounding sexual harassment and to raise awareness

of the gravity of the issue. In a content-based course on Western culture which I conducted with a small group of students in a national university in western Japan in early 2018, I made use of a wide range of materials that students found motivating. Simple key word searches on major Internet search engines yielded fruitful results. For example, we used role plays and real-world scenarios from the University of Exeter's (2018) pedagogical resource toolkit, the *Intervention Initiative*. Activities in the toolkit underline the responsibility of bystanders to help prevent the continuation of acts of sexual harassment which are often ignored due to the influence of toxic campus cultures. The scenarios and role-plays provide realistic conversational texts with many casual register vocabulary items that students may well hear when they travel abroad. I also employed another text from the U.K., the Thames Valley Police Force's (2018) instructional video clip on the issue of consent. This is a three-minute, animation clip *Tea and Consent*, which succinctly and clearly explains the very complex and sensitive issue.

A particularly effective dramatization of a case of workplace sexual harassment is provided by the U.S. actor David Schwimmer who produced six dramatizations of everyday instances of sexual harassment, with all clips available online. The vignette, *The Coworker*, was particularly helpful, as we had access to a *New York Times* article (Miller, 2018), which provides the transcript of the video dialogue as well as a range of insightful comments from gender scholars and activists. Students could also easily access video clips from human resources websites and workplace training programs, such as those from U.S. media companies, Kantola (2018), and J. J. Keller (2018). We debated the various merits of different types of video dramatizations, as well as key points raised by TED Talk speakers. We also discussed clips from an interview (YouTube, 2018) with the journalist Ito Shiori, a woman who has come to be seen as the face of sexual harassment issues in Japan. Ito argues that high levels of rape and serious sexual assault will continue in Japan as long as broader social and cultural norms see sexual harassment as a relatively trivial issue. Ito's case, and other sexual harassment issues, have been elaborated in many newspaper articles in Japan and other countries, and these real-world texts proved a valuable resource in the classroom.

At the end of the semester, students were given a choice between a short essay on what they had learned about western culture or what they had learned about sexual harassment issues. Eight out of eleven students chose the latter. End-of-term written comments from students which reflected

high levels of awareness included the following: "I think Japan has a lot to work to do in terms of sexual harassment"; "Victims need to raise their voice and tell others"; "We do not learn about sexual harassment at school. We need to learn more about it"; "In the beginning of the class . . . I assumed that the problem was not so serious. Actually, I have never seen someone being sexually harassed. I thought the problem was not related to me too. But the class changed my thought."

Overall, my limited experience incorporating sexual harassment issues into a content-based curriculum indicated that these issues can be motivating for students and can make a difference from a critical perspective. Ideally, in the future, many language educators will incorporate sexual harassment issues into their teaching as these issues can involve transformative engagement with timely real-world topics that are of interest to many students

Initiatives Within Education

Some recent initiatives are aimed at proactively empowering young Japanese women who are vulnerable to sexual harassment. Organizations like *Chabudai Gaeshi Joshi Akushon* (Table-Turning Women's Action Group) are visiting universities and schools in Japan to conduct empowerment training and to educate students about issues of sexual harassment and consent (Ito, 2017). In the case of *Chabudai Gaeshi*, women turn the tables on male oppressors as they act out an expression of anger and defiance, strengthening their resolve to break the culture of silence that has shielded their harassers from justice. The group holds discussions that focus not only on empowerment of women, but also on transforming men and the models of masculinity that keep them tied to self-limiting and impoverished personae like "the classroom bully" or "the office harasser."

As well as raising awareness in the classroom, language instructors can also lend support to those initiatives which aim at eliminating sexual harassment from their schools, campuses, and all other social sites. Vocal support may be necessary if the interests of the institution's reputation are seen as more important than the pursuit of justice for victims. Creaser (2012, p. 34) shows that when concerned stakeholders try to initiate policies that proactively challenge sexual harassment offenders in Japanese universities, they are often met with a lethargic response, as avoiding rocking-the-boat and bad publicity seem to be the fundamental priorities. Yet, it is only when organizations and schools provide and implement clear guidelines and procedures that the task of seeking justice is made feasible, both for victims and for those who want to report

suspected breaches of conduct. If we see students being silenced in our classes because of sexually suggestive or abusive comments or behaviors, we should intervene and follow the guidelines that are designed to protect vulnerable individuals. When work colleagues have been victimized, our practical and moral support may prove invaluable, especially if the victims feel reluctant to pursue justice and challenge the perpetrators. A desire to encourage victims to break their silence has led to the setting up of a website for EFL practitioners, ELTtoo (2018). The site provides a forum for survivors of sexual harassment to share their stories and to raise awareness of the extent of the problem in the world of English language education.

Final Reflections

From a critical perspective, educators are complicit in the maintenance of unjust power structures in society if their classroom practices and institutional choices leave inequalities unaddressed. The seriousness of problems like sexual harassment urges us to acknowledge that praxis should involve problematizing all unjust power structures that are based in cultures of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and all ideologies of discrimination. These ideologies often lead to the creation of an atmosphere in social institutions that allows people to be targeted due to their less powerful positioning, and issues of power are relevant whenever sexual harassment occurs. Research data indicates that sexual harassment is an issue of concern in many educational institutions, especially as the negative effects of harassment on young survivors are intensive and long-term. My own teaching experiences with undergraduate university students indicate that sexual harassment issues can be of interest to language learners in Japan and that a range of accessible multi-media resources exist to incorporate related issues into broader content-based curricula. By making use of a wide range of materials to raise these issues and promote lively, empathetic classroom discussion, we can help break the culture of silence which perpetuates a grave social injustice.

References

- A turning point in the war on sexual harassment? (2017, October 30). *Japan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/10/30/editorials/turning-point-war-sexual-harassment/#.W5dqGM-mICUk>
- Conte, A. (2010). *Sexual harassment in the workplace: Law and practice, 2010-1*. New York, NY: Wolters Kluwer.

- Creaser, F. (2012). Harassment prevention policies at a Japanese university. *The Journal and Proceedings of GALE*, 5, 22–37.
- Currie-Robson, C. (2014, September 28). Eikaiwa, deal with sexual harassment of teachers, before it's too late. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/09/28/issues/eikaiwa-deal-sexual-harassment-teachers-late/#.WiNKA4hpHIU>
- ELTtoo (2018). *A movement to raise awareness and take action against harassment and bullying in ELT*. Retrieved from: <https://elttoo.wordpress.com/>
- General Union. (2014). Sexual harassment by students in eikaiwa. Retrieved from <http://www.generalunion.org/sexual-harassment/1046-sexual-harassment-by-students-in-eikawa>
- General Union. (2017). Gaba meets General Union's demands. Retrieved from: <http://www.generalunion.org/gaba/1817-gaba-meets-general-union-s-demands-client-blocking-procedure-published>
- Gruber, J., & Fineran, S. (2016). Sexual harassment, bullying, and school outcomes for high school girls and boys. *Violence Against Women*, 22(1), 112–133.
- Huen, Y. (2007). Workplace sexual harassment in Japan: A review of combating measures taken. *Asian Survey*, 47(5), 811–827.
- Ito, M. (2017, Jan. 6). Shifting attitudes towards sexual violence in Japan. *Japan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/06/national/social-issues/shifting-a-ttitudes-toward-sexual-violence-japan/#.WnekKojLjLU>
- JALT (2018). JALT Code of Conduct. Retrieved from <https://jalt.org/main/jalt-code-conduct/>.
- J.J. Keller (2018). *Preventing discrimination and harassment for employees (Canada)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.jjkellertraining.com/Views/InteractiveTraining/CourseDescription.aspx?CID=1807>
- Kantola (2018). *Is your harassment training up to date?* Retrieved from <https://www.kantola.com/>
- Kazue, M. (2008). The making of *sekuhara*: Sexual harassment in Japanese culture. In S. Jackson, L. Jieyu & W. Juhyun (Eds.), *East Asian Sexualities: Modernity, Gender and New Sexual Cultures* (pp. 52–68). London and New York: Zed Books.
- McKinnon, C. (1979). *Sexual harassment of working women: A case of sex discrimination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Miller, C.C. (2018, January 26). David Schwimmer made six short films about sexual harassment: We annotate one of them. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/26/upshot/sexual-harassment-script-react.html>
- Miura, Y. (2017, Dec. 7). 「まさか君が僕を訴えるとは」性犯罪加害者たちの滑稽なほどの“被害者意識” [“I Never Believed You Would Accuse Me”: How ‘Victim Awareness’ among Sex Offenders Borders on the Absurd]. *Asahi Shimbun: Aera*. Retrieved from <https://dot.asahi.com/dot/2017120500010.html?page=3>

- Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Record 226 school staffers in Japan punished for obscene acts or sexual harassment in fiscal 2016. (2017, December 28). *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/12/28/national/record-226-school-stfe-rs-japan-punished-obscene-acts-sexual-harassment-fiscal-2016/#.Wm7XYoj LjIU>
- Seagrave, K. (1994). *The sexual harassment of women in the workplace: From 1600 to 1993*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Survey finds male students in Osaka prefecture suffer more dating violence than females. (2016, February 8). *Mainichi Japan*. Retrieved from <http://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20160208/p2a/00m/0na/017000c#csidx170cd8ce367afb2948de0b3210ef084>
- Thames Valley Police Force (2018). *Consent is everything*. Retrieved from <https://www.thamesvalley.police.uk/police-forces/thames-valley-police/areas/c/2017/consent-is-everything/>
- University of Exeter (2018). *The intervention initiative*. Retrieved from <https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/research/interventioninitiative/>
- Unlu, V. (2017). Some like to say 'what happens at conferences stays at conferences.' *ELT Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://digital.elgazette.com/december-january-2017/some-like-to-say-what-happens-at-conferences-stays-at-conferences.html>
- Waldron, H. (2017). Speak out, but he heard: Against sexual harassment in ELT. *EFL Magazine: The Magazine for English Language Teachers*. Retrieved from <http://www.eflmagazine.com/speak-heard-sexual-harassment-elt/>
- Yamasaki, A. (2017, November 8). In Japan too, we need to talk about sexual misconduct. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2017/11/08/voices/japan-need-talk-sexual-misconduct/#.WgjoulhpHIU>
- You Tube (2018). Shiori Ito broke Japan's silence on rape – the outcome was brutal. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcOTPMiCqe8>
- Yuan-Shan, C., Dih-ling, L., Hung-Shen, L., & Bai-Syuan, H. (2012). Psychological distress and experiences with sexual harassment among junior high school students in Keelung City. *Taiwan Journal of Public Health*, 31(4), 326–335.

Robert O'Mochain has been teaching English in Japan for the past twenty years. He is a graduate from Temple University Japan's language education programs and is currently employed as an associate professor at Ritsumeikan University's College of International Relations. He is involved in the activities of GALE (Gender Awareness in Language Education).



JALT2019 • *Teacher Efficacy, Learner Agency* — Call for Proposals—

Hello JALT Community! A BIG proposal deadline is coming soon—February 1, 2019 for vetted proposals (May 13, 2019 for unvetted proposals). This year's conference theme is "*Teacher Efficacy, Learner Agency*" and will be cochaired by Catherine Littlehale Oki and Steven Herder. We have so much more to bring you. Always view <https://jalt.org/conference/call-proposals> for the latest news regarding conference proposals, and see <https://jalt.org/conference> for all things JALT2019, which will be at the WINC AICHI in Nagoya from November 1–4!!!!