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RESEARCHING ENGLISH AND CULTURE
AND SIMILAR TOPICS IN ELT

ABSTRACT: When researching opinions about English and culture and similar concepts we must acknowledge that there are powerful ideological professional discourses which influence both respondents and researchers. We need therefore to find more creative methods to look at the complex reasons why ELT professionals talk about, for example, “native-speakers” as though they are simply American or British even though it is now established that the concept is highly contested. Such creative, postmodern methods can no longer claim modernist rigour and validity on the basis of objective distance. Researchers should instead develop disciplined strategies for managing their subjective presence in the research setting. The written study needs to provide detailed account and justification for these strategies in every step of the research process.

KEYWORDS: English culture, research methods, postmodern writing, ideology, discourse

0. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am going to discuss the issues which arise when ELT professionals or applied linguists carry out research in the area of English and culture, and, because it has been connected in recent discussions, the issue of so-called “native speaker” models, teachers and methodologies. I am here using English and culture as an example of a wide range of possible social and educational topics. I shall begin with an overview of the area and why it is particularly problematic, and then look at what needs to be explained in the written study. My approach is that of a qualitative researcher working within a postmodern paradigm. This is however an opportunity to move away from the commonly expressed qualitative-quantitative divide because many of the principles of qualitative research – looking in depth and being cautious of statements of proof – can and should apply to all social research.

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1. WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT ENGLISH AND CULTURE

In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the relationship between English as a world language and culture. This has been fuelled by the realisation that the concepts of British and American English are highly problematic if they are going to be used as models for language learning. They are very difficult to pin down as they contain huge variety and change rapidly. Also, other forms of English have become established as standards. Because of the increasing flow of English across the world, in a multiplicity of media, the traditional boundaries of English are themselves becoming questionable (Saraceni 2010). The idea of one-language–one culture is thought by many to be the false product of 19th century nationalism in Europe or of a Western image of globalisation, which has, through a methodological nationalism, negatively influenced social science and popular perception (Ahmad 2008:9; Beck & Sznaider 2006:2; Bhabha 1994; Crane 1994; Rajagopalan 2012:207; Schudson 1994:21; Tomlinson 1991). The native–non-native-speaker distinction has long been considered linguistically invalid (Jenkins 2000; Phillipson 1992); and the idealisation of the “native speaker” has become mixed up with issues of race and employment discrimination (e.g. Kubota & Lin 2006). There is a very extensive critical discussion of the native speaker concept with regard to the multilingual “ecology” of Indian English in Agnihotri and Singh’s (2012) edited collection. Conclusions range from the concept being meaningless to the need for serious re-thinking. It is certainly acknowledged that Indian English is a native speaker English if the term does have value. Amritavalli (2012:54) makes the point that Chomsky’s theory of an ideal speaker-listener “leaves open the possibility that there is no single real native speaker who completely represents any real linguistic community; ultimately, every speaker represents only himself or herself,” and that trying to fix the native speaker is more a concern of language teachers than of linguists. This resonates with Rajagopalan’s (2012:210) view that if there were to be such a thing as a native speaker it would be of whatever linguistic repertoire she or he uses.

These views resonate with a paradigm shift from modernism and postmodernism in social science (Kumaravadivelu 2012). There is much
written about these terms, which are highly contested. Modernism, as used here, is an ideology which seeks to establish objective truths and rules about social life. It is suited very well by supposedly neutral, objective, scientific concepts of national languages and cultures which can be quantified as separate entities with definable profiles. I use the excellent analysis in Usher and Edwards (1994) to support my definition of postmodernism – that all so-called social truths and rules are governed by ideologies and the discourses which serve them. In this sense, everything we think about people and society is socially constructed, including concepts of national languages and cultures. A definition of ideology which I like is “a set of ideas put to work in the justification and maintenance of vested interests” (Spears 1999:19). I define discourse as a way of using language which represents ideas about how things are (Holliday 2013:101).

The outcome of this critique is that the boundaries of English and culture, and “native speaker” are socially constructed. This can be seen all around us as these concepts are commonly spoken about, with shifting boundaries in different ways for all sorts of reasons (Baumann 1996). However, within the ELT profession, because there is the modernist need, which can be found in all professions, to show accountable, measurable expertise and knowledge, these boundaries have become particularly fixed. We talk easily of different languages having different cultures and of “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” teachers as though they are clear and objective concepts (Holliday 2005).

2. WHAT THEREFORE DOES NOT WORK

All of this means that trying to find out what English teachers and students think about English and culture is not a straightforward matter of asking them and reporting what they say. There is a distinct danger of easy questions and easy answers which will quite smoothly skirt along the surface, with both the researchers and their participants talking about English and culture as though they are clear and objective concepts. ELT professionals have been taught this in their professional training; and their students have imbibed these modernist concepts in their
classrooms because they also wish to have measurable signs of success and failure.

Easy questions are those which do not invite the participants to evaluate the concepts being asked about. Examples might be “do you prefer American or British English?,” “do you think learning English threatens your culture?,” “do you think the native speaker model threatens your culture?,” “which of the following classroom activities are incompatible with your culture?.” The participants are not being invited to evaluate what is meant by “culture,” “native speaker,” or different standards of English, but simply to choose between them. Also, presumably because the focus is on a simplistic notion of “national culture difference,” the researcher has completely ignored the possibility of Indian English. They are also the sorts of questions which easily generate quantifiable responses. Studies which use such questions can also easily be replicated to other populations and give the impression, by covering different populations, of gradually finding out what everyone thinks.

This type of research suits the modernist aim to pin things down. It feeds the modernist professional need to refine its products. It also serves academic hierarchies. By filling literature reviews of past studies, it helps starting academics to build sound research portfolios which can also be taught to masters students. However, modernist research fails in the furtherance of knowledge because it remains within the boundaries of the modernist professional discourse. It is positivist research in which the starting categories are taken as given, and for which examples can always be found. Moreover, there is a denial of ideology in that the asking of surface questions and reporting surface responses implies that the issues and meanings involved are also straightforward and matter of fact and are not underpinned by ideology and related discourses.

3. RE-THINKING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

To get beyond the easy questions and easy answers it is necessary to dig deep. It is important to set out the research agenda in different terms and to establish what sorts of things we need to know about English and
culture if we really are going to extend our knowledge of what is going on. To reiterate, the reason why we need research to address these deeper questions is because the politics is undeniably there. In a recent very short visit to India, in a handful of conversations, I heard university academics tell me that English is an Indian language and that the desire for British English in India was a thing of the now distant colonial past. However, I also heard university English language students tell me that their teachers were still telling them that British English was the only viable model. This small piece of experience resonated across continents – from British teachers in Canterbury telling me that they no longer want to teach British English, to hearing that Asian American teachers are being labelled “non-native speakers” by employers in the UAE because they are not white (Ali 2009:39), to the proliferation of newspaper advertisements in Mexico which sell language schools by how many “native speaker” teachers they have (Lengeling & Mora Pablo 2012).

There are puzzles here which need to be addressed. Is the myth of the British or American “native speaker” so powerful that it continues to take people in, or does it represent some sort of brand that people consciously buy into because it has personal, academic, professional or some other status? Are these discourses that people consciously play with? Is it possible that people can at the same time know and forget, or choose to forget, or choose to forget that something is true or not true? Are there deep dualities fired by recidivism? I look in some detail at the complexities of what goes on in these respects between people, discourses and culture in Holliday (2013).

Questions of this nature come from what we see around us in everyday life. And we need to connect our professional and academic selves with being in the social world. With respect to this, Stenhouse (1985:31) famously wrote that reading Flaubert’s novel, Madame Bovary, will teach us far more about issues of gender, identity and marriage, than the survey results of “472 married women respondents.” I had personal experience of this insight about the value of fiction when recently reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2013) novel, Americanah. It is about a young woman’s struggle with identity as a school and then university
student in Nigeria, and then making a life in the US, and focuses very much on the shifting politics of concepts of Nigerian, British and American English. I felt that it told me more about the issues of English, culture and race than all the academic works I had read put together. All the discussions that we have in critical applied linguistics are there in this multi-faceted image of everyday life. Excellent fictional literature can do this. The ultimate aim of good social research is to capture some of this complexity while at the same time displaying the scientific rigour required by the academy.

4. A POSTMODERN PARADIGM

I will now turn to research methodology which enables us to meet this aim – engaging with complexity which is embroiled in ideology, discourse and social construction, while maintaining rigour and validity. My focus here is on qualitative research because most of the discussion concerning the postmodern turn has been there. I do however believe that the principles in question can also be applied to surveys and experimental social research because they are essentially about how it is possible to research what people do and think. The key here is how researchers think of and position themselves.

What might broadly be called a postmodern revolution in ethnography and qualitative research is often traced back to the publication of the seminal *Writing culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986). The main critique is that clinging to a modernist, positivist mode places the researcher as artificially distant from the subject of the research. It had long been imagined that the researcher was able to gaze invisibly and without interference on the behaviour of subjects. By maintaining this distance, researchers believed they could objectively describe what was really going on. In interviews and surveys this objective distance was maintained by asking everyone the same and minimally intrusive question which required low-inference analysis. The dominant postpositivist mode was even worse because it allowed more high-inference questions and qualitative analysis while still pretending to be non-intrusive and objective, with a worrying lack of researcher reflexivity.
The postmodern revolution thus recognises that researchers are involved as soon as they engage in any way with social settings (perhaps with the exception of hidden microphones and cameras). Even when asking easy questions, even when they are invisible authors of survey questions on paper, researchers are interacting with their research participants. Indeed, there are not any easy answers because every act of interpretation is caught in this interaction. Moreover, researchers are just as embroiled in ideology, discourse and social construction as the people they are researching. The people in the research setting are therefore not untouched by researchers. They interact with them; and this is not problematic because (perhaps with the exception of the most isolated communities) people everywhere always interact with outsiders. There is no such thing as a pure culture.

I do not wish to give the impression that the only way to preserve objectivity is to carry out covert research with hidden surveillance devices and extremely isolated communities. Instead, it is recognised that the research will be richer and more productive if there is interaction with researchers, simply because we all learn through interaction, and the researcher’s presence may be positively instrumental in bringing hitherto tacit meanings, which are deeply embedded in ideology and discourses, to the surface. Indeed, researchers may build on their own experience to understand and engage with the experience of others. It is now established that in the interview there is a bigger complexity taking place, where the interviewer and subject co-construct meaning (Miller 2011:58). Merrill and West (2009) present a useful discussion of these issues. This opens up all sorts of creative possibilities for the researcher, breaking away from some of the traditional conventions – such as interrupting and probing (Roulston 2011:92). When transcribing one of my own interviews, I at first felt that it was disqualified because I was intervening and leading the conversation too much. However, on further analysis of the interaction it became clear that my intervention was encouraging the interview subject to enter into greater detail about highly informative material which was beyond my aspirations for the interview and breaking unexpected new ground (Holliday 2012).
Therefore, instead of through objective questions, sampling and statistics, a different basis of validity and rigour has to be found – by carefully describing and justifying every decision and action which is taken in the research process. Every key action taken by the researcher needs to be described and justified. The science is indeed in the principled and rigorous positioning and claims with regard to the nature of evidence. I provide a full discussion of this “showing the workings” in Holliday (2007).

5. HOW TO PROCEED

The task in hand revolves around three sets of dynamics that need to be reconciled. (a) There are the dynamics of the research and the researcher. These involve the reasons for doing the research – adding to existing discussions, wanting to find something out, wanting to inform practice, and so on. There is also the orientation of the researcher. This concerns the researcher’s own professional prejudices – attitudes towards and beliefs about what is being researched and the participants of the research, which will be influenced by ideology and professional discourses just as they will for the participants. It also concerns the researcher’s relationship with the participants – teacher, colleague, status and so on. All of these will affect how the participants will respond to the research and therefore need to be thought through.

(b) There are the participants and their setting. Here I am assuming that research into English and culture will indeed involve people, though there may also be documents and physical environment. They also have their attitudes towards and beliefs about what is being researched, and also about the researcher. Researchers too often imagine that their participants have the time and interest to take part, when in fact the interviews or questionnaires may be something they want to get rid of quickly. These things will hugely influence what they tell you.

(c) The third set of dynamics is the researcher’s strategy to reconcile (a) and (b). Here one might picture the researcher, with the research interests in (a), looking cautiously at people and the setting in (b) and
trying to work out how to approach them, what position to take, how to present her- or himself and the research. This is in fact where the real research begins; and there is still time to reassess the research aims themselves. Indeed, in the classic ethnographic methodology, “as far as possible, both questions and answers must be discovered in the social situation being studied” (Spradley 1980:32). In one sense, anything is possible; the choices of how to proceed are wide open – whatever works. In another sense, extreme discipline must be applied. Janesick (2000) describes this balance well, through an analogy with choreography, the mixing of creativity and discipline.

At the core of this discipline is the question I ask doctoral candidates:

- given that you are present and implicated as an interactant in the research setting, with your own set of ideological preoccupations
- given that you designed the research project, set up its events and selected what to present in the written study

what have you done to ensure that there is space for the unexpected to emerge – for the participants to express views that were beyond your expectation?

Reflexivity is an immensely important ingredient of this discipline – which is “not just a matter of being aware of one’s prejudices and standpoints but of recognising that through language, discourse and text, worlds are created and re-created in ways of which we are rarely aware” (Usher & Edwards 1994:16).

Armenta’s (forthcoming) study of Mexican university language teachers’ and students’ perceptions of culture is a good example of the reconciliation between these three sets of dynamics. She fears that if she simply asks what they think about culture, they will tell her that English equates with “American culture” because this is the dominant professional and also popular discourse. This is especially the case because she is either their colleague or their teacher and this is the discourse that they share in the setting of the university. After considerable searching for an alternative way to approach them, she hears some students complain about stereotypes of “Mexican” and
“American culture” which their American teachers have presented in the classroom and which they find offensive or threatening. She decides to write these as critical incidents and to ask her participants to respond to them. This strategy pays off because her study matures into one in which the participants go into detailed accounts of how they struggle with identity in the process of making sense of and constructing culture. This is a very small study, with only seven participants. This does not matter because it does not claim to be a statistically representative sample of what they think, but of how professional discourses of English and culture operate. Part of the validity of the study is that she succeeds in intervening in such a way, while allowing her participants sufficient space, to enable unexpected new knowledge to emerge.

6. WHAT THEREFORE HAS TO BE EXPLAINED

Because the validity and rigour of the postmodern approach require showing the workings, there is important detail which must be included in the written study. I will look at this within the traditional structure – introduction, literature review, methodology, discussion of findings, implications, and conclusion. The amount of space given to these sections will of course depend on the allowed word-count; and in longer dissertations and theses these will become chapters or groups of chapters. One observation in this breakdown is that there is no “results” section, because this would imply an objective presentation of low-inference data which does not belong to this approach.

As well as what would normally be expected in the introduction, it is important to define terms. It is not any more possible to talk about concepts like “native speaker,” “culture” or, for example, “British English” without discussion. A researcher who is making them the core of the study needs first of all to know that they are deeply contested, and therefore needs to explain carefully how it is possible to use or focus on them and how they are going to be used in the written study. In the literature review there needs to be a clear statement about how the research is positioned with regard to the major discussions in the area of the research. There should be a similar positioning of the research
approach in the theoretical part of the methodology section. It is important here to show consistency and knowledge. For example, arguing that a qualitative, or postmodern approach, is being used, or an approach which addresses the ideology or politics or discourses of ELT without engaging with the issues discussed in this paper would indicate lack of consistency and knowledge.

In the methodology section there also needs to be a description and laying bare of the strategies of the procedure of the research. Depending on where the main issues lie, this would need to include – who the participants are, why they were chosen, how they are located with regard to the issues – who the researcher is, how she or he is related to the participants, what her or his prejudices and beliefs are, how all of this may affect the research, what issues this raises – in relation to these issues, how the relationship between the participants and the researcher is managed, how the participants are approached, how the research and the researcher are presented to them – how questions are asked, in what events, in what settings, with what sorts of interventions, and why – what sorts of space are allowed the participants, how they have the opportunity to say the unexpected.

It is also crucial to describe what sort of data is collected, and why, and how this is analysed, and, very importantly, how this analysis is converted into the presentation and discussion of data in the next section. This cannot simply be a summary of the outcomes of interviews. An effort must be made to allow the unexpected to have a place in the written study. A classic qualitative strategy is to take a holistic approach to the data (Holliday 2007:89): to (1) leave the initial detailed interview or survey questions behind, (2) see what themes emerge from the data as a whole, including unexpected elements, (3) use these themes as headings to organise the discussion of findings, and (4) use examples of the data to support an emerging argument. Indeed, the test of the whole study will be that this argument, rooted in and faithful to the data, will introduce knowledge which was not anticipated at the outset of the research. The validity is carried not through the replication of a previous study, but through the development of qualitative insights into how things might be.
7. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to cut a very long story short in order to provide some basic guidelines to counter the dangers of easy questions and easy answers. The focus has been on researching English and culture; but the principles apply to social and educational research more generally, both in ELT, applied linguistics and beyond. However, not only are there no easy questions and easy answers in the topics we wish to research. There are also none in the methodology for the research and the writing of the research. Especially when we consider how to get published in academic journals, there are huge constraints and struggles regarding how much space is allowed and how far the editors and reviewers are open to a more postmodern approach. The struggle does however run in both directions. Writers must always be prepared to convince their audiences; and in the end it is good writing with a convincing balance of creativity and discipline, discussion and evidence which carries the day.
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